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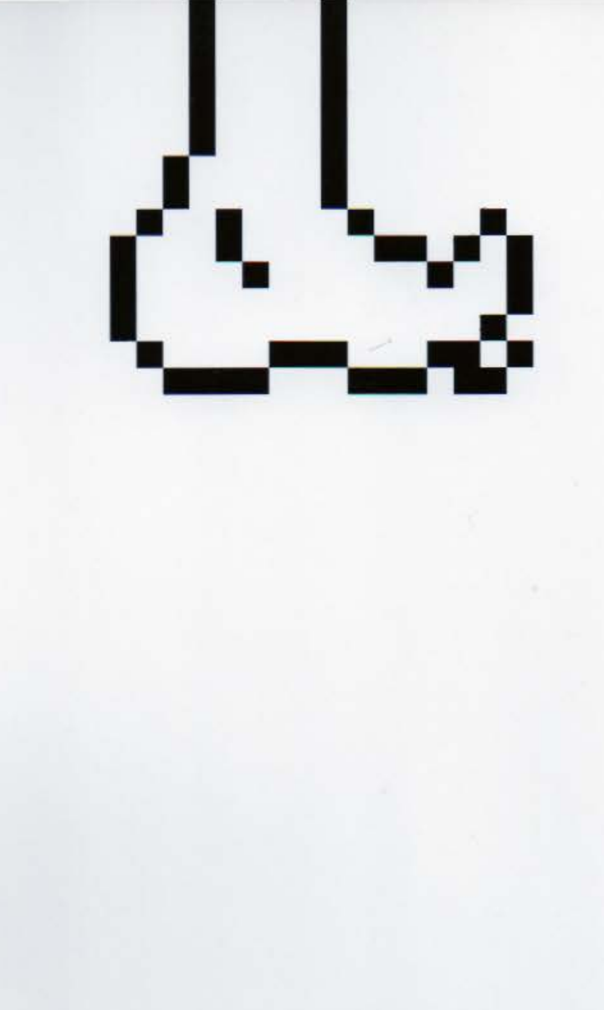
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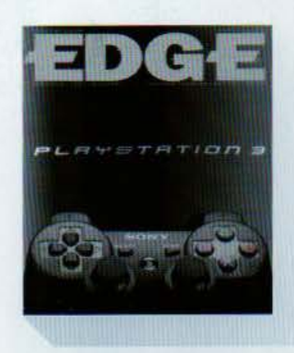
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PLAYSTATION 3









What you hold in your hands, right now, is the future of gaming. Looked at one way, that future is dark with mystique – the high-tech, multimedia, aspirational vision of Sony. Looked at another way it's light with simplicity – the low-cost, entertaining, accessible vision of Nintendo. Turn from the back to the front to the back again, and it forces a realisation: we're all fanboys now.

That's not a thing to say lightly, but even the most rabidly ecumenical gamer will find that it's impossible to look from PS3 to Wii without warming to one a little more instinctively than the other. If the god of gaming appeared to you and declared he was going to give you the choice of which future was destroyed, and which was ensured, would you really be able to say: "Go ahead, mate – your pick. It's all the same to me"? It's impossible to avoid a bias, because the choice you're being offered is simply too stark. This isn't a rivalry between two pieces of hardware design, but between two schools of thought, and its inevitable that one or other will be more closely aligned with your own. And, whichever way you lean, the future of gaming will be in your hands, because your purchasing decisions will ultimately determine the viability of both machines.

So does that inevitable bias mean an end to objective debate? Not at all, for two simple reasons. The first is that, even with the launch of these two consoles, we're a long way off seeing the whole picture. All game hardware evolves over its lifespan, but these machines both have a potential it's close to impossible to chart. Starting on p56, we sit down with both to see how they perform in the flesh, and what each machine reveals about the other.

And the second reason? It's that no matter how strong a prejudice is, greed will always trump it. No matter how much you want one of these consoles to outdo the other, there's one thing you want more: to have it all. And with the enormous potential of both machines, there's more all than there's ever been before. So here's our cast-iron, copper-bottomed, prediction for the future: it's going to be a pricey time to be a gamer.



EDGE

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"Both hands on the wheel, Mr. Jones, I'm a very nervous passenger"



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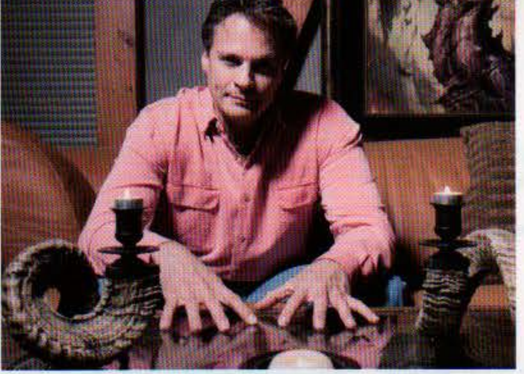


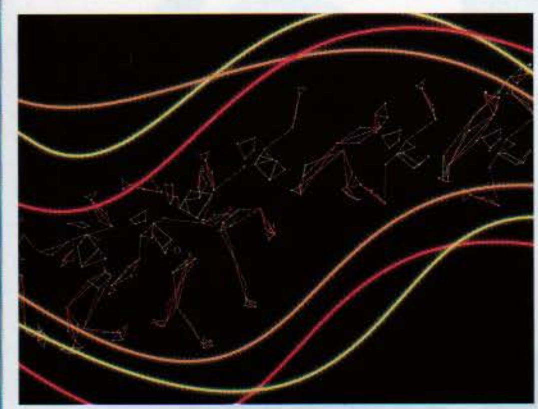
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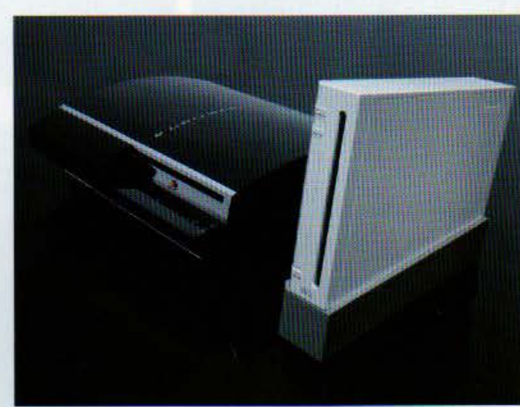


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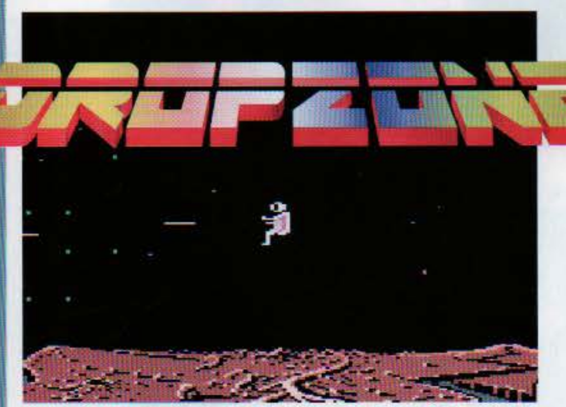
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START

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Faster, higher, further, richer

ESports has reached a key milestone, but how well placed is it for the future?

In 1906, the revived Olympic Games were ten years old. More than 900 athletes drawn from 20 countries assembled in Athens to compete in 13 sports. A century later, and it's eSports that are ten years old. And so last month 700 players, drawn from 70 qualifying countries as diverse as Bangladesh and Guatemala, met in Milan for the seventh World Cyber Games. The self-styled Olympics of computer gaming is the world's most high-profile tournament. The winners of national qualifiers receive expenses-paid trips to attend the grand finals, in which they compete for $462,000 (£242,000) of prize money.

The Olympic comparison may seem excessive, but for attendees it seems entirely reasonable: this festival of gaming, running over five days, featured elaborate opening and closing ceremonies, live stage performances, dedicated commentators and a substantial players' village. Competing across PC (*FIFA Soccer 06*, *Counter-Strike*, *Need For Speed: Most Wanted*, *StarCraft: Brood War*, *WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne*, *Dawn Of War: Winter Assault*) and Xbox 360 (*Dead Or Alive 4*, *Project Gotham Racing 3*), it was South Korea that was finally crowned grand champion, despite no single country dominating the medals table. The South Korean team topped the medal charts with two gold medals, one silver and a bronze, due only to their dominance at *StarCraft*, in which they took the top three positions. In other genres the medals were spread evenly, with Russia and Germany taking second and third



The closing ceremony followed the awarding of medals and featured a concert by local Italian bands plus a handover to The Seattle Sports Commission, which will host the games next year

Award key

Gold Silver Bronze



Official recognition?

The long battle to get eSports taken seriously

This summer a prominent group of figures in the UK eSports scene, calling themselves the UK eSports Gaming Initiative (UKEGI), announced that they were collecting information together to put a bid before Sport England, the government body of sports in England, to receive official recognition. This would essentially make eSports a recognised sport.

It's not the UK's first attempt at gaining recognition. In 1999 The Playing Fields, a London-based gaming centre once very much the heart of a thriving *Quake 3* scene, attempted government recognition as a PR stunt. Rumours claim an official from Sport England replied: "You're joking, right?"

It's unlikely that UKEGI's application will prove successful. Following London's successful bid for the 2012 Olympics the government is promoting an array of activities and events designed to get more children into sports. Scare stories on the obesity of today's youth have caused the government to tackle the problem. To take such steps as banning fast food adverts and then promoting children sitting at home playing games would appear counterproductive. However, the bid does bring about an important discussion for the future of eSports. Does it need to become an official sport? Would eSports be better as part of the Olympics or expanding its own events, such as the World Cyber Games? In China and South Korea eSports has thrived since receiving its status as an official sport from the government – though western culture is unlikely to be as accommodating to the idea of basement-dwelling teenagers referring to themselves as professional athletesttttttttttt.

places on the national medal table respectively. Over the past few years the eSports tournament circuit has become especially crowded. From just two global bodies in 2002 (Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL) and World Cyber Games), there are now just under a dozen such event organisers, and even these organisers host multiple events over a given year. The CPL, for example, with the help of strategic national partners, will this year host eight separate events.

As competitions have evolved, so have the players. Gaming clans no longer consist of likeminded gamers; they have evolved into professionally organised companies



And this is what it was all about: the trophy awarded to the grand champions

The World Series Of Video Gaming, also in association with national partners, is responsible for another six events, and the World eSports Games, based in south-east Asia, hosts two to three events a year, lasting four to eight weeks

In addition to these global organisers, and respective national qualifiers, there are also major one-off competitions. In March this year, Micah Ernst, a 23-year-old technology student, won $100,000 (£52,500) in the Verizon FiOS Grand Tournament. The tournament used *Half-Life 2* DM, an unpopular game among professionals, and attracted over 6,000 online participants. However, such prizes for online competitions are rare, and the difficulty in preventing the use of cheats means top players typically use the internet only to practice for more respected offline competitions (see 'Getting into shape').

ESports has come a long way since the release of *Quake Test* (*QTest*) in 1996. This multiplayer beta release of *Quake* attracted



The opening ceremony was reminiscent of the Olympics, but lacked the flaming torch. Along with big players like the US, UK and South Korea, competitors from nations such as Romania, Mexico, Poland and Finland took part



Those 700 gamers needed to be fed (above) but the effects of too much stimulant drink on otherwise steady reticules and mouse pointers should not be underestimated. A big screen with multiple cameras (right) allowed the audience to keep up not only with the action from within the games, but the price paid in terms of clenched jaws and ground teeth by the players



thousands of tech company employees and college students and within months enthusiastic online gamers were already mobilising themselves into teams and organising events. The first major offline (LAN) tournament, Red Annihilation, took place in May 1997. Dennis 'Thresh' Fong, the world's first professional gamer and later founder of gaming network hub XFire, won the first place prize of John Carmack's $70,000 Ferrari. By the time *Quake 3* was released in 1999 there was a booming eSports circuit in place. Spearheaded by early licensing of the CPL brand, top duellers were plying their trade in countries around the globe. Many of these top gamers were also now full-time professionals, sponsored by major hardware and software companies. It was a good time for players like Sujoy Roy, the UK's first full-time gamer, who received a six-figure sum from Razer to promote its Boomslang line of mice.

That early boom proved precarious, however. Unfortunately for eSports, a number of major sponsors were significantly affected by the popping of the dotcom bubble in 2000, and subsequently withdrew their sponsorship funds. Roy, who had walked out of a job as an investment banker in Wall Street to turn professional, soon found himself an unemployed 25-year-old gamer – a position with few prospects. He has since retired and now focuses on other gaming endeavours (see 'The ultimate gaming arenas'). But, in the latter half of 2001, eSports regained its footing, thanks in no small part to the popularity of *Counter-Strike*, then an amateur team-based *Half-Life mod*, which had overtaken *Quake 3* as the most popular online game. When the CPL announced that *Counter-Strike* would be the headline game for their first ever world championships, it marked a major switch towards team-based events.

As the competitions have evolved, so have the players. Gaming clans no longer consist of likeminded gamers looking to compete together in events. They have instead evolved into professionally organised companies. The older teams, such as SK-Gaming and Four-Kings Intel, will be celebrating their first decade early next year. Both of these teams enjoy six-figure sponsorship sums and powerful brand names. SK-Gaming in particular boasts the most recognised gamer brand







The ultimate gaming arena

A new Sektor for eSports emerges in the UK

In comparison with continental neighbours, the state of LAN gaming in the UK has been dismal. As Sujoy Roy (above), former professional gamer and now owner of the Omega Sektor café in Harrow, recognises: "Centres in the UK have not been wildly successful. They tend to be small, with a poor level of service, not built to a high standard, located in the wrong places, with prices too high and computers too slow. I'm being a little critical, but I do include my own gaming centres in this summary. The problem is that it is a catch-22 situation. To build a really good gaming centre, you need the money to start with. If you don't have the money, you end up cutting corners, not putting in enough staff and never making enough money to ever expand into the all-singing, all-dancing centre that will keep customers happy and make a big profit."

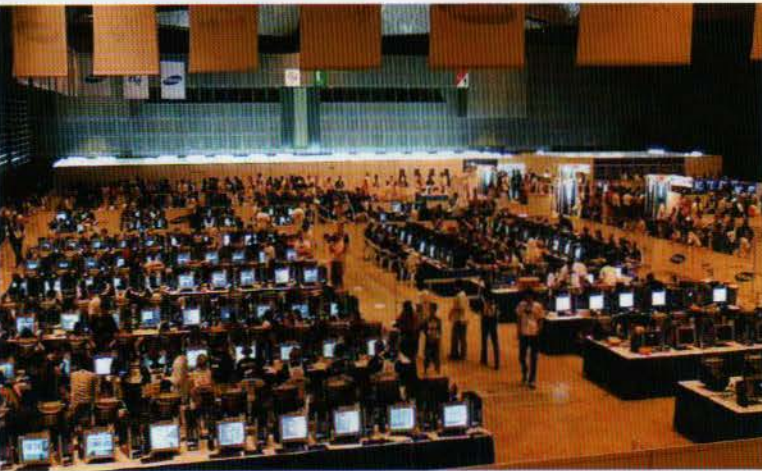
The idea of a 'super-centre' in the UK has been touted for a few years now, yet thus far no one has had both the guts and financial backing to pull it off, but this is about to change. Six months ago Roy and business partner Dominic Mulroy (founder of LAN Arena gaming centres) were contacted by a Kazakhstan-based company to create the 'ultimate gaming centre'. The first new centre, to be opened in Birmingham this winter, will offer gamers better PCs than they have at home, a faster internet connection, and a more club-like experience.

in the world, a name so powerful it attracts the best players from as far as China and South Korea: it presently represents the collective interests of over 79 players worldwide.

It's a long way from the informal gatherings of 1996: gaming teams are now registered companies with contracted players and dedicated fans. The professionalism of these teams appeared to have struck a major milestone in 2003 with the first player transfer. Ola Moum, a 17-year-old Norwegian *Counter-Strike* player for SK-Gaming, was purchased by rival team NoA from North America. However, since 2003 transfers have been rare, and, amusingly for some, have mostly involved Moum: following his much-publicised 2003 transfer, he has since played for teams in Norway, UK, Brazil and Germany.

In south-east Asia, gaming has taken a very different direction. Seoul, the eSports capital of the region, is a densely populated city in which most of the population suddenly found themselves with broadband speed internet connections overnight. Outside of the western influence of gaming, RTS games such as *StarCraft* and *WarCraft* – ironically both western-made – are the most popular, and the country is both fiercely proud and supportive of its booming eSports culture. South Korea is also home to the world's most highly-paid gamer, *StarCraft* player Park Jung Suk. The 22-year-old is reportedly on a salary of $230,000 (£120,400).

There is also a growing console splinter of eSports, which many believe is where the real, massmarket future lies. Major League Gaming, a US-based console league, was founded in 2002 and has experienced plenty of recent success, with its 2005 purse totalling $250,000 (£140,000). In 2006, partly due to $10m of venture capitalist investment, the prize purse will exceed $800,000 (£420,000). Yet these figures do not fully reveal the league's success. In June of this year the league signed top US gaming team, Final Boss, to $250,000 contracts to compete solely in MLG events for the next three years, and it has also completed a deal with USA Network television to air specials of each of its tournaments on cable television throughout November and December this year.



And it's these TV deals which are key: ask any professional gamer or event organiser about the future of eSports and the responses will usually include the need for 'mainstream coverage'. Signs of support are increasingly encouraging. In addition to the MLG's deal with Air Network, Games Media Properties – parent company of The World Series Of Video Games – is also rumoured to be close to securing a deal with a network TV station for regular coverage. But even as TV outlets wake up to the potential audiences for live gaming events, they may already be too late. Research is already showing that younger audiences are spending more time on the internet than watching TV, which could mean that improved online coverage is the way forward.

This too has improved significantly over the past year. Any major eSports tournament will now feature an array of in-game footage relayed over the internet, streaming commentary from a professional on-site team, live footage of the players themselves competing, and online scoreboards. It's a process that drives investment as well as encouraging audiences: many events are beginning to generate additional sources of income through licensing their coverage to local gaming portals. This drew criticism during the 2006 World Cyber Games when the much anticipated final of the *Counter-Strike* tournament was not relayed online due to licensing



The UK entered nine players into five games, but emerged without a medal. British Team Dignitas took on Canada, Serbia, Thailand and Kazakhstan in the Counter-Strike contest





More than 1,900 players from 70 countries playing 12 games were whittled down through heats and national qualifying sessions to the 700 who took part in the grand finals



agreements between organiser ICM and a local gaming organisation.

However, there are more pressing issues ahead in the future of eSports than mainstream coverage. As proven with the burst of the dotcom bubble, eSports as a whole, and professional gamers individually, are extremely susceptible to the whims of sponsors. A bad financial year for Intel could significantly affect the marketing budget available for investing into gaming teams and tournaments, both of which would suddenly leave a generation of top gamers without any stream of income. While a handful of teams have begun retailing their own clothing, offering gaming lessons and creating exclusive 'insider' content on their websites for those willing to pay a monthly fee, this will not be substantial enough to get teams through tougher times.

The ever-increasing number of tournaments, coupled with greater level of competition and subsequent practice to stay at the top, is also taking its toll on many players. Kyle Miller retired in January after just six years as the US's most famous and successful *Counter-Strike* player, for the less intensive challenge of a career in IT, but the timetable he escaped is growing more gruelling. Within a week of the World Cyber Games, many players were back in action in other corners of the world. Swedish silver medallist *Counter-Strike* team NiP (Ninjas in Pyjamas) were back in Sweden to compete against rivals SK-Gaming in an NGL-One League game before flying to Hamburg the next day for the Electronic Sports League Masters Championships. American and South-East Asian players did not have it much easier. Within a week of the World Cyber Games the likes of Team3D (the US's representatives), EG (Canada's representatives) and many others were in Mexico City competing at the Pan-American Cyber Games. South-east Asian players were likewise summoned to compete at the Chinese eSports Games in Chengdu, China.

It means that, despite the TV deals and the growing prize funds, those competing in the current eSports scene have a tough deal. Mastering one game and finishing consistently within the top five is in itself extremely difficult. But, with the exception of *Counter-Strike* and a couple of core RTS titles, eSports events adopt whichever games are popular at the time. Players must therefore be able to transfer their skills from one game to another, and very few are consistently able to do so. Jonathon 'Fatal1ty' Wendel, the world's most famous professional gamer, is one of the few who has been successful. An 11-time world champion in five different games (all of them FPS), Fatal1ty has the time and resources to master various events. Yet even he has failed to place higher than fourth since winning the CPL World Tour grand finals in New York last November.

Another common problem for players is receiving their prize money. In 2003 ClikArena, a French tournament held in Toulouse, failed to deliver on any of the promised €30,000 (£20,000)











Top of the medal table was South Korea, who reclaimed the title after four years. Russia took second with a gold and a silver, while Germany came in third place with a gold and a bronze



of prize money. Then in January 2004 CyberXGaming, a Las Vegas event promising over $500,000 (£262,000) in prize money, proved to be an even bigger disaster. Following extensive technical problems during which the organisers publicly accused Valve Software of attempting to sabotage the event, the tournament was cancelled without players or teams reimbursed for travel or accommodation expenses.

If eSports is to evolve, players need far better protection. Not just from burnout and the possibility of being unemployed after a bad fiscal year, but also from the tournament organisers. Fortunately, the situation looks set to improve soon. In August seven of the top gaming teams worldwide announced the launch of G7, a coalition for the benefit of teams and players. Among the aims of G7 is "to promote cooperation and good relations between G7 and Event Promoters as well as any other eSporting institutions and/or professional eSports teams, paying special attention to negotiating the format, administration and operation of the teams' competitions in which the team members are involved." A wider range of sponsors may also help regularise the industry. Non-gaming companies are beginning to show an interest, as shown by Pizza Hut's investment in the CPL, Red Bull's in Major League Gaming and clothing lines' support of a few of the top teams.

But despite increased growth and stability, the rise of eSports is not yet assured. After being overtaken by online poker, it now finds itself battling against MMORPGs both in terms of popularity and media coverage. It's all too easy for media to confuse the process of making money playing in computer gaming tournaments and generating income through selling virtual artefacts. It's worth noting that, although multinational news agency Reuters recently assigned one of its reporters to cover the '*Second Life* beat', no sports magazine presently has an eSports writer.

It's worth noting that, although multinational news agency Reuters has assigned a reporter to cover the 'Second Life beat', no sports magazine presently has an eSports writer

The current problem is that players are more vulnerable when chasing the professional gaming dream than any competitive sport. Enthusiastic gamers are susceptible to being strung along with false promises, insecure financial incomes and sacrificing their young lives to reach the professional plateau. Even those who make it quickly find that it's not as glamorous as they first thought. Until the financial and legal support is in place to transform the professional gaming dream into a better reality, eSports remains a labour of tough love for professional players.



China's only gold medal came in the *WarCraft III* tournament from Xiao Fen Li



Getting into shape

How leading players prepare for eSport's biggest events

There are, most unfortunately, stories of gamers preparing for gaming events by performing bizarre finger exercises, but for most of the time this simply isn't the case. As David 'Zaccubus' Treacy, the UK's top-earning gamer for 2005, explains, it's all about practice:

"As soon as a gaming tournament is announced I will find a player of roughly equal ability to practice with online. I find that one of the best ways to learn to improve your game is to develop tactics in this way. It also helps to counter my practice partner's basic skills such as aim, timing and control.

"Roughly two weeks before the event begins most games will start to boot camp with team mates and practice partners in a LAN centre to get use to the subtle differences of offline gaming. It might sound strange, but it is also important to get used to different playing environments such as higher chairs. I've seen players take pillows from hotel rooms to get the right height in the past.

"At the LAN centre we will then step up the level of practice considerably, playing four to six hours and going to bed very late, often 4am. We then wake up early the next afternoon and continue practicing. It's normal for top players to keep playing until our fingers refuse to move any more, and even then we watch replays of both our own games – to spot mistakes – and potential opposition players', to spot weaknesses."



Fatal1ty (above) played in the Invitational Quake 4 All Stars, coming second. The US team took home only one medal, a gold, after triumphing at *PGR3* following its youngest member, 17-year-old Wesley 'TTR ChOmpr' Cwiklo's blistering undefeated run at Monza





GametrakFusion

HARDWARE

Forward motion

Gametrak's ultrasonic Fusion takes motion-sensing control a step further than the Wii Remote – into true 3D space, and onto rival platforms

Not many predicted success for it, and fewer still noticed it have any. But Gametrak – the ingenious, wire-driven 3D motion-sensing controller, released when EyeToy was a novelty and Wii still a closely-guarded secret – actually performed quite well for its start-up parent company In2Games, selling 350,000 units, mostly in its home territory of the UK, and off the back of its sports sim, *Real World Golf*. Well enough, at any rate, for the company to survive, grow and amass much more substantial finance for its next project, Fusion, due to hit shelves in the second half of 2007. Fusion is a thirdparty game controller with fascinating and unpredictable implications for the snowballing field of motion-sensing in games.

It consists of a wireless 'freehand' controller, similar in appearance and function to the Wii Remote, although conceived before Nintendo made its magic wand public, and using a different technology: ultrasound. It can be manufactured cheaply and should be available for around £30. A floor-sitting base unit has four ultrasonic sensors that, by picking up the signals from a number of transmitters on the remote and measuring how long the sound takes to reach them, can accurately triangulate its position in 3D space within a three-metre range. This is backed up by information on its orientation from onboard accelerometers – the chips that use degrees of tilt and acceleration to extrapolate movement, as used in the Wii's Remote and Nunchuck, and the PlayStation3's Sixaxis controller. Rumble will not be included, primarily for cost reasons.

In theory, it's a more adaptable technology than Nintendo's. The Wii Remote has two separate modus operandi – accelerometers for motion detection and infrared for pointing – that, in launch games at least, are seldom used at the same time, and have limited capabilities in terms of true 3D positioning. The misleadingly-named sensor bar is actually an array of infrared emitters detected by a sensor in the end of the remote when, and only when, it's pointed at them. Under those conditions it can work as a highly accurate pointer and triangulate its position in 3D space, but point it away and only the accelerometers function – indeed, it seems likely that many early games, including *Excite Truck*, *Wii Sports* and *Wario Ware*, don't use the sensor bar in gameplay at all. In those situations, the Sixaxis is exactly as capable as the Remote, and Fusion a good deal more so.

Of course, it's not the data you have but what you do with it that counts, and *Wii Sports* proves how surprisingly precise and subtle accelerometer-based control can be. Fusion has the potential to take Wii concepts further – for instance, In2Games' current tennis demo gives you control of player as well as racquet, tracking movement across the court – although its more limited range might hamper multiplayer sports games somewhat. But In2Games has no illusions about the fact that Nintendo's wholesale adoption of motion-sensing is of tremendous potential benefit to the Gametrak cause, as developers create games and control schemes which, with Fusion, can be easily transposed to PS2, PS3, 360 and PC.

This might solve the problem of the original Gametrak – software support. In2Games, as a publisher, did not have the resources to back up the device with more than two titles, and despite its reasonable sales other publishers were not forthcoming. With more financial muscle this time around, In2Games is promising to publish three titles in the first year and 20 over four years – of which about 70 per cent will be sports-themed. Most will come with a free peripheral that fits to the remote and physically transforms it into a racquet, club, bowling ball or gun as appropriate – an approach which not only increases tactile realism but, with the addition of extra ultrasound transmitters in the peripheral, will precisely tailor its data and accuracy for that application.

In2Games says developers and publishers are



Most games will come with a free peripheral that fits to the remote and physically transforms it into a racquet, club, bowling ball or gun as appropriate

Newswire

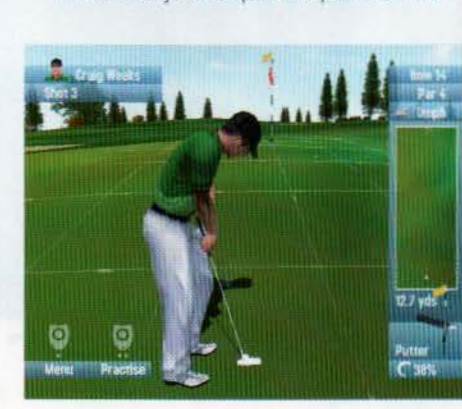
Lik-Sang licked

On October 24, cherished Hong Kong import retailer Lik-Sang announced that it has been forced to close down in the face of several lawsuits brought by Sony Computer Entertainment. A London High Court judgment decreed that the online store had indeed infringed Sony's rights by selling Asian PSPs directly to European consumers. Lik-Sang has promised to refund any pending orders and to resolve outstanding customer queries as quickly as possible, pledging in a statement that: "Lik-Sang will make sure nobody gets hurt in the crossfire of this ordeal." For its part, Sony has defended its decision to mount legal action by citing safety and compatibility concerns, but few are convinced that the move isn't simply indicative of territorial protectionism on the hardware giant's part.

Correction

Due to misinformation, we failed to credit Alistair Lindsay for his work on Defcon's excellent soundtrack in our review in E168. Apologies.





***Real World Golf*, recently updated as a 2007 version (right), is the first Gametrak's biggest hit. *Dark Wind* (far right), the launch beat 'em up, was much less warmly received.**

The prototype wand-style controller (centre right) runs on four AA batteries for upwards of 45 hours play. The behaviour of sound waves, and therefore the accuracy of ultrasound detection, can be affected by changes in air pressure. Fusion's ability to work around this is a key part of In2Games' technology patent

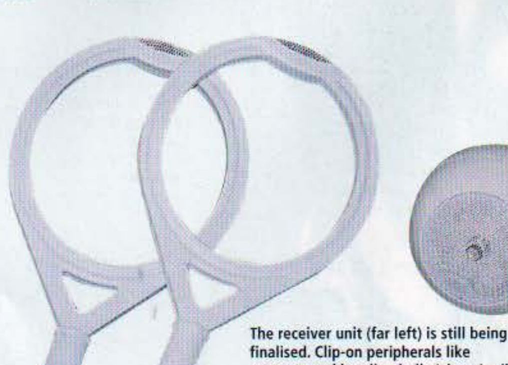
responding enthusiastically to its demonstrations – given the prototype's solid performance and the general industry excitement surrounding the Wii, that's easy to believe. With a far greater commitment to marketing, it hopes to sell 'many millions' of Fusions, but serious question marks still hang over the controller's future. First must be Sony's willingness to licence it for PS3 at the risk of devaluing and distracting from Sixaxis, although In2Games at least has a working relationship with the Japanese giant from the first Gametrak, and views Fusion as a very different, less transparent device, with the tactile appeal of, say, the *Guitar Hero* controller. Even if Fusion can be established on PS3, the competing attraction of the universal Sixaxis may keep many developers away.

Another concern is its ability to handle the more complex or traditional control schemes that the Wii's Remote-and-Nunchuck combination can. In2games currently envisions releasing a separate, two-handed controller at a later date: essentially a traditional gamepad which can be split in two, each side fully loaded with accelerometers and ultrasound transmitters. This has tremendous potential, but further dilutes a proposition that, without the immense weight of a dedicated hardware platform and the corporate will of a platform-holder behind it, already risks getting lost in gaming's swollen crate of novelty peripherals.

Gametrak is confident that Fusion is the best of the motion-sensing technologies, but its fate is inextricably tied to the Wii's, and to some extent to that of Sixaxis too. It needs to capitalise on their ubiquity, and the spread of motion control in games, while proving itself more capable than either. To a large degree its success rests on the abilities of designers outside Nintendo to fully embrace the paradigm shift the Wii represents (something few are managing as yet), never mind exploit Fusion's greater power in positional detection. In2Games and its development partners will mostly likely have to do this alone before other publishers commit, and that's a tall order. If all goes well, Fusion can make Nintendo's dream an all-access, platform-agnostic reality – or even sell itself to the highest-bidding platform – but that's a mighty big goal for this little British invention.









The receiver unit (far left) is still being finalised. Clip-on peripherals like racquets and bowling balls (above) will be bundled free with their games

SOUND BYTES

"Even though I already have a 'Sony ID', I may have to create a new 'Resistance ID' to play. And then start thinking about just how broken the experience is when you try to invite someone to a game."
Xbox Live's Andre Vignaud (writing before Insomniac's confirmation of Resistance's unified sign-in) gives his entirely unbiased view on Sony's PS3 online systems

"[Microsoft are doing] a disservice to their consumer base because they are ignoring all those people who bought the Xbox 360 Core system. We at Sony would never segregate or shut out any of our consumers from our entertainment experience because they didn't buy the top of the line system."
SCEA's Dave Karakker gives his entirely unbiased view of the need for a hard drive for Microsoft's new Video Marketplace

"It would not surprise me if a year from now they'll be struggling to sell one million units."
Atari founder and ex-CEO Nolan Bushnell sees big things ahead for the PS3

"It's like going into a new house and thinking: 'Let's cook dinner. But hang on, we've got no cutlery. And we need to make the pots and pans. Right, let's start making them.' Everyone is asking us what dinner is going to taste like and we're too busy making the pots and pans."
Free Radical's David Doak on next-generation game development



INTERVIEW

Stalking Stalker

Ukraine's GSC on what was behind the nuclear FPS's three-year delay

Anton Bolshakov of GSC takes *Stalker*'s delay in his stride. The project has thus far taken up four years of his life, though it's done nothing to dampen his spirits

Stalker: Shadow of Chernobyl almost slipped into the annals of gaming urban legend: simply uttering its name prompted the whispered question, "Will it ever be released?" Publisher THQ now says it will, almost definitely in Q1 2007, some three years later than scheduled. Having been chaperoned around the actual nuclear disaster site by Ukrainian developer GSC on the previous day, we're now back in the more cosmopolitan climes of downtown Kiev. We've been here before, two years ago in fact, when the game was said to be nearing completion. It was anything but. In 2004 THQ drafted in external corporate producers to complete development. Despite the publicity this generated, everything from then on is a bit of a blur, so we're keen on getting the inside track from GSC's point of view.

When we ask about the actualities of the delay, it's clear it's something project leader Anton Bolshakov really doesn't want to talk about. In fact his answer's so well-rehearsed that it's immediately apparent GSC has perfected the art of marketing diplomacy since we were here last. "All developers are dreamers by default," Bolshakov says, dividing his attention between the fruits of his labour on screen and us. "Having a hands-on publisher helped a lot to speed things up, to force us to stick to schedules. It was important to have THQ's co-operation. Especially for *Stalker*."

Not satisfied, we push a little further. Everyone here is more than aware that everything's being carefully monitored by THQ's ever-vigilant PR machine. But there's a suggestion in everything Bolshakov relays that we're to read between the lines; that, as is probably common in an ex-Soviet republic, there's a hidden subtext to what's said lest it's overheard. "Let's just say having the publisher there drew a line between what developers want to do and what publishers say is possible."

Drawing lines, you feel, is important for an outfit like GSC – a team whose professional sense of independence must have taken a direct hit when THQ intervened. In describing GSC's relationship with THQ, Bolshakov shrugs off the publisher's involvement as though it were just another pragmatic consideration in the morass of things to get done in order to finish the game. Not that there's any hostility there, just that, as relationships go, it feels like a very open marriage. "We didn't need them to tell us what was wrong with our game," he states, hoping to close the matter. "We figured out for ourselves what the issues were."

But publishers aren't in the habit of arbitrarily taking over the production of projects where developers themselves are perfectly capable of seeing a game through to completion. So what were THQ up to on a day-to-day basis? What steps were actively, physically taken to ensure *Stalker* would one day hit the shelves?

"It was mainly a process of figuring out what was integral to gameplay," Bolshakov explains. "As developers we would eternally like to create



Random enemy encounters powered by the AI are a unique selling point for the game, although they can interrupt the overall narrative pace





GSC couldn't really have asked for a more atmospheric setting. The ecological tragedy on its doorstep provided the real-life inspiration for the kind of apocalyptic hellhole many other games can only imagine



something new, so the publisher had us draw up a list of things that were still outstanding. We simply singled out the ones that were irrelevant to play."

A process of elimination, then. But what exactly needed to change? "Some things that look great on paper don't translate well in reality. I'll give you an example – vehicles," Bolshakov offers. "We'd want to have a car moving at 80 miles an hour, but at that speed it was really hard to control. So you end up travelling over some radioactive anomaly, veering off into a danger zone and you're dead immediately. It's this kind of thing THQ had us whittle down."

Control, that's the issue. When you experience at first hand the random complexities of *Stalker*'s underlying AI system, you can understand how much would have been reigned in. Monsters and other Stalkers (vigilante artefact dealers) roam freely around, entirely independent of more conventionally scripted events; the aforementioned deadly anomalies randomise play settings and enforce route diversions; even the *terrain* has an underlying AI system of its own, able to adapt to in-game actions. An unchecked combination of these things would have made completing the game almost impossible. Why did GSC want to create such a complicated engine when the usual aim-and-shoot dynamic would showcase their programming talents just as well?

"We wanted a special atmosphere," Bolshakov says. "We're trying to focus more on the open-ended kind of environment you don't often see in an FPS, to liberate players from the corridor, something we couldn't achieve with the likes of the Quake engine." Speaking of which, so many important FPS titles have been released over *Stalker*'s five-year development cycle. Did the game change to adapt to the competition? "Sure, when something like *Half-Life 2* came out, THQ would ask us to introduce elements of it into the game." But, Bolshakov is keen to add, "We weren't copying anyone. And there was no pressure."

"We wanted a special atmosphere. We're trying to focus more on the open-ended kind of environment you don't often see in an FPS, to liberate players from the corridor"

Software engines aren't the only things to have changed. PC hardware now looks radically different, a point well illustrated by the *Serious Sam*-era visuals of *Stalker*'s 2004 iteration. "At top spec it's now very advanced, over a million polygons per frame. But this is where the delay helped," he smiles. "The game was originally built for lower specifications, so you won't necessarily need top-range hardware to enjoy it."

As Bolshakov finishes this last sentence, it strikes home: the people at GSC aren't game-makers who happen to play games, they're gamers who happen to make them. What remains with us after this meeting is their infectious sense of ambition and passion, only slightly tamed by the economic realities of meeting market demand. And if this experience has strengthened GSC's resolve, teaching it about the business of game-making while delivering a large dose of reality to boot, then the next thing Bolshakov puts his name to could well be far more important. As residents of the Chernobyl zone know only too well, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

OUT THERE

CHIPTUNE CONCERTS

Experimental musicians have long used obsolete videogame hardware to help produce their aural art – Beck is said have studied the finer points of Game Boy instrumentals. Now it seems the trend has evolved to the point where it's taken seriously enough to warrant its own staged event, as New York plays host to the Blip Festival. The four-day extravaganza is described by its promoters as the "biggest and most comprehensive in the history of the form." Predominantly focussed on Nintendo's consoles, Blip's website promises to provide an authentic atmosphere with 'art-damaged Sega hardware' – whatever that is. Its 30 acts will include the Japanese NES-loving 8bit pop combo YMCK, computer artist Cory Arcangel and banjo/Game Boy maestro Bud Melvin, whose handheld and folk fusion is said to range from 'country and western to post-modern psychological diasporia.' The festival runs from November 30 until December 3 in Manhattan's Nissau Club.

YMCK

• www.blipfestival.org



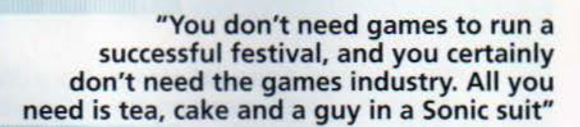
Playing in Gamecity

Diversity and fun were the watchwords for Nottingham's first Gamecity festival


University of Nottingham's Jacob Habgood continued his game-making workshops with two sessions teaching children how to make games using the Game Maker software

Considering the current shakeout in the insular world of trade and consumer game shows, Nottingham's inaugural Gamecity festival, held from October 25-29, demonstrated there is another way, with over 30 events pitched beneath its wide umbrella.

These ranged from the highbrow, a New Statesman-sponsored panel talk about the wider value of games; to the oddly moving, a recital of classic Sega tunes by composer Richard Jacques; and the comic, a party for Sonic's 15th birthday, attended by a man in a seven-foot hedgehog costume. "Apparently you don't need games to run a successful festival, and you certainly don't need the games industry. All you need is tea, cake and a guy in a Sonic suit," joked Gamecity's director **Iain Simons**, when asked how he thought the four-day event had gone.



"You don't need games to run a successful festival, and you certainly don't need the games industry. All you need is tea, cake and a guy in a Sonic suit"

Also helping create a friendly atmosphere were local developers, with Free Radical Design particularly notable in its enthusiasm. One highlight was the Free Radical Gong of Terror, where a dozen wannabee game makers pitched their designs to the Free Radical team; at least until three of the four capricious judges signaled their dislike, triggering the in-house muscleman to bang his gong. The two winners won internships at the studio, thanks to their ideas for a raindrop game and lederhosen rumblepack peripheral.

Some speakers came from further afield, however, with technical lead on the *Spider-Man 2* game Jamie Fristrom flying in from Seattle to talk about creating Spider-Man's web swing, while the BAFTA Vision statement was given by Lorne Lanning of Oddworld Inhabitants (interviewed on p44). As well as talking about his own journey through the trials of game development, Lanning also took the opportunity to announce the company's next project. Together with Oddworld partner Sherry McKenna, he's linking up with Shrek producer, John H Williams, to direct his first film, an animated movie called Citizen Siege.


One of the more riotous events at Gamecity was Free Radical Design's Gong of Terror where you could pitch game ideas to company's three directors and watch a large man bang a gong


Taking a rest from developing *Oddworld* games, Lorne Lanning (top) is back directing animated feature Citizen Siege, which will also boast a companion game. Lord Puttnam (above) kicked off Gamecity with a passionate keynote extolling the potential of games both as an artform and an educational medium

This will extend the environmental thread of the *Oddworld* games in a more overtly political fashion, with themes such as totalitarianism and the power of corporations. Lanning said a game would be developed in conjunction with the movie, as the sharing of assets between the two productions is one of the synergetic benefits available with next-generation consoles.

Other, more vocationally-focused events included a Sony-led afternoon on the role of audio within games, and a Skillset-organised panel talk about how to get into the industry. Skillset founder Lord Puttnam launched the festival with a keynote speech about the important of games as learning tools.

"We're trying to do something a bit different," Simons said. "Hopefully events like Gamecity provide an opportunity for the industry to explore how it can be cultural relevant and interesting, as well as enabling gamers and students to meet developers in a fairly relaxed environment."

And with preparations already underway for 2007, it looks like Nottingham will be providing a valuable environment to celebrate the wider value of games for some time to come.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

More than 3,300: that's how many MMOs the encyclopaedic MMO Portal documents. Amazingly, its staff claim to have played and reviewed 1,053 of them. Containing information on everything from the MUDs of old to Blizzard's latest *WOW* patch, the site wears its passion for online gaming firmly on its sleeve. So if you can't yet tell your MUSH from your MMOTBS, the MMO Portal provides a perfect opportunity to learn. And who knows, you might just make a few new friends in the process.

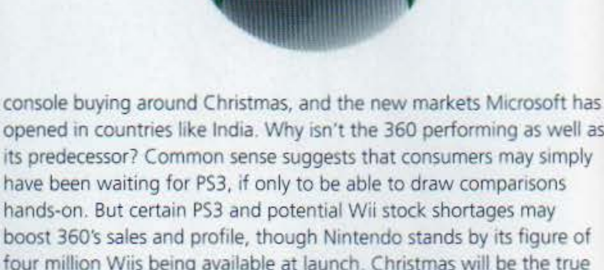
The portal breaks down game types from alpha testers to released final products – handy if you want to try getting in early on a community that could well bloom into something phenomenal. Spanning all clients, interfaces and operating systems, every possible MMO genre is accounted for.

It's also kept bang up to date, something of a rarity in the fickle world of fan-maintained websites.

Site:
MMO Portal
URL:
http://mmo.portalsnetwork.com







FINANCIAL

360 trails Xbox

Microsoft in danger of not living up to its own standards

When Peter Moore took the stage at X06 and reiterated that 360 shipments would total ten million by the end of the year, his confidence seemed high. But the announcement that, by October this year, Microsoft had shipped only six million 360s, significantly lower than the original Xbox's nine million unit shipments over the equivalent period three years ago, must have dented spirits at the company. This has serious implications for Microsoft, which may well fall short of its self-imposed ten million machine target by year's end. CFO Chris Liddell has defended that original estimate, maintaining that the company is still 'confident' of hitting the mark, but it is difficult to see where those four million sales will come from, even taking into account the usual upsurge in console buying around Christmas, and the new markets Microsoft has opened in countries like India. Why isn't the 360 performing as well as its predecessor? Common sense suggests that consumers may simply have been waiting for PS3, if only to be able to draw comparisons hands-on. But certain PS3 and potential Wii stock shortages may boost 360's sales and profile, though Nintendo stands by its figure of four million Wiis being available at launch. Christmas will be the true test of consumer intentions: come January the situation will be clearer.

Sony and Nintendo also released financial results recently, with the latter performing especially well. Nintendo's overall income for the second quarter of 2006 stands at $327 million (£172 million), 72 per cent up on last year, whilst Sony's profit fell 94 per cent to $14 million (£7 million), as battery recalls and the PS3's delay together cost the firm $366 million (£192million).

Continue

Importing
Gaming is a global culture: it shouldn't be restrained

Nostalgia
File provides invaluable evidence of old hair cuts

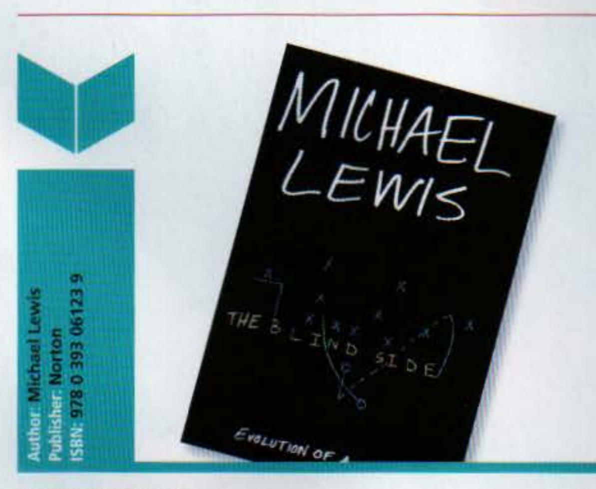
Festivites
GameCity shows how gaming shindigs should be

Quit

Broken promises
Delays and cancellations: can't we stick to the plan?

Wii Elbow
A nasty new ailment for videogaming's case book

Cables
At last the living room is free of controller wires



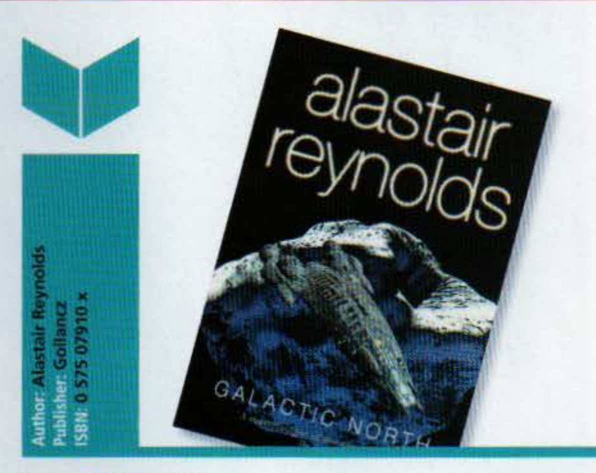
Author: Michael Lewis
Publisher: Norton
ISBN: 978 0 393 06123 9

THE BLIND SIDE

American football collides with the complexity of economics, race, religion, love and individual talent

It's not often **Edge**'s book reviews venture outside the hinterland of games industry, sci-fi or business. In the case of The Blind Side: Evolution Of A Game however, the exception is certainly worth the break. For the story Lewis has stumbled across is a dazzling intersection of how individual brilliance changed the plays and business of American football, and perhaps most refreshingly, touched US society too.

At its heart sits the unlikely figure of Michael Oher. One of 13 children to a crack addict mother, he miraculously wound up among a handful of black kids at the exclusive Briarcrest Christian School. But with an IQ of 80 and little schooling, only the sports department kept the 6 foot 5 inch, 23 stone teenager enrolled. Adoption by the Tuohy family; rich, Christian and white, follows. Lewis also tracks changes in American football through the explosive talents of players such as Lawrence Taylor, the linebacker who almost singlehanded changed the way the game was played. This, in turn, fed into new salary structures and the type of college players teams looked to recruit to protect their quarterbacks. And this is where the physique and athleticism of Oher collides with football strategy; he's NFL's perfect storm. But what makes this such an amazing read is the way Lewis weaves the actions of the protagonists – adoptive mother Leigh Anne Tuohy particularly stands out – into a whole. Let's hope one day a book this good will be written about the games industry.



Author: Alastair Reynolds
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07910 x

GALACTIC NORTH

A short story collection in the Revelation Space universe will provide fans with food for thought

The UK's pre-eminent hard sci-fi author of the past decade, Alastair Reynolds' latest book is akin to the b-sides, rarities and early demo collections put out by successful bands who want to tick off another of their contractual releases. Clearly it's not a book you'd buy to get a first timer engrossed in the increasingly complex span of his Revelation Space universe. For completists though, Galactic North will be highly prized, particularly thanks to the afterword section in which Reynolds explains something of his inspiration and the chronology of the collection, which started with the short but snappy Dilation Sleep; itself the first piece of sci-fi he had published. Indeed, perhaps what's most interesting is to see how his writing style matures. Early shorts have something of Philip K Dick's rushed-through, too-quickly-concluded style, for example. But by the time of lengthier stories such as Nightingale and Grafenwalder's Bestiary, Reynolds' pace has slowed and his characteristic poise and touch of grotesqueness comes to the fore. Best though is the eponymous closing chapter, which despite its briefness demonstrates the scale of his universe; both in terms of the individuals who underpin it and the battling races – Conjoiner, Ultra and Demarchist – which provide its broad-stroked background. In fact, there's more than a hint of Tolkien's Simillarion in the three-way betrayal of Remontoire, Markarian and Irravel. Let's hope Reynolds has plenty more mind space to explore.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Def Jam: Icon

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** EA



Hopes of EA Chicago bringing a Total Punch Control-style breath of fresh air to *Def Jam's* grimy streets remain high, the developer proposing thorough integration of music into arenas and combat

Dark Sector

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** TBA



A holding page on its official site tells us that everything we know of this one-time Kojima-alike is "probably wrong". By the look of these latest screens, that might include the exciting bits as well

Field Ops

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** FREEZE INTERACTIVE



It continues to dare but will it win? Freeze's genre hybrid has given itself plenty of targets to shoot for, but has *Company Of Heroes'* pre-emptive strike laid waste to the most spectacular?

Layton Kyoju To Fushigina Machi

FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** LEVEL 5



Belleville Rendezvous artist Sylvain Chomet might cock a brow at the art style of this impromptu departure, doomed for now to be lost in the hubbub over the mechanically adventurous *Shirokishi*

Ninja Gaiden Sigma

FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** TECMO



Incremental upgrades to the fighting engine of *Gaiden Black* look likely to be this port's most productive, but specular highlights and better filtering effects at least make credible its HD overhaul

Colin McRae: DIRT

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** CODEMASTERS



Few other series can claim an unblemished record for screenshot integrity, previous tech demos having assured us that even if this is just a mock-up, the reality of *McRae 6* will be closing in fast

Harvest Moon DS

FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** RISING STAR



Managing the resources of your disarmingly cute animals is one thing, but actually being able to touch them? Taking its cue from the last GBA version, Natsume's farmstead goes all stylus-friendly

After Burner: Black Falcon

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



Not a port of Lindbergh's *Climax*, Planet Moon's PSP exclusive is taking Sega's franchise on an errant course back into console airspace. Expect multiplayer modes and story-based missions

Europa: Universalis III

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** PARADOX INTERACTIVE



It takes quite an R&D war machine to churn out units as often as Paradox's series, a new engine excusing the third game's lengthy development. With 1,700 provinces, its scale is still overwhelming



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH
Neon Wars

www.reflectedgames.com/neonwars.html

Neon Wars' Geometry-inspired visuals mean it initially feels like the second tier of videogame plagiarism. But spend a little time with it and you'll notice a major difference in its control mechanism. This, daringly, is a shmup without a fire button. Guiding your ship with the mouse, bullets automatically home in on the nearest enemy, creating a western spin on the bullet-grazing dynamic familiar from a number of Japanese classics. Collecting power-ups evolves your weapon configuration, meaning that the traditional roles are reversed: the weird and wonderful enemies that cross the screen (spitting out the sort of sparkly particle effects *Retro Evolved* has perfected) are caught in your bullet patterns, not the other way round. And, should they prove too slippery, a variety of smart bombs means that button-pressing hasn't quite become a lost art.

That it also contains a laptop control option means that you won't have to wait for Live Anywhere to take the *Geometry Wars* concept mobile.









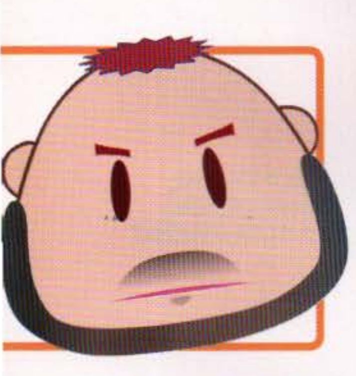
You can understand why film financiers would be reluctant to invest heavily in a videogame-based movie after looking at this rogue's gallery. In Halo's case, it's interesting that Peter Jackson's involvement hasn't been enough to reassure the movie companies





Uncertain futures

Game producer Brick Bardo on Halo, developments in CGI and the new console wars



No one would argue that games have inspired some truly awful movies (Super Mario Bros, Street Fighter, Final Fantasy, The House Of The Dead, need I go on?) Which is why so many of us were excited to hear that Halo: The Movie was going to be produced by Lord Of The Rings and King Kong director Peter Jackson. However, it has since turned out that Fox and Universal have baulked at the high cost of the project (Jackson's not exactly known for making low-budget films...) and pulled out, resulting in its possible collapse. Sad news indeed. With the worldwide release of *Halo 3* for the Xbox 360, 2007 should have been the year of *Halo*, with a blockbuster movie putting the icing on the cake.

Of course all the money in the world couldn't have guaranteed it wouldn't turn out to be just as much of a turkey as the second Tomb Raider, but with Jackson at the helm the chances seemed better than good. I can't help thinking that Microsoft could have easily financed it, but then again, it's probably wise of them not to get too heavily involved in the movie business.

At the moment, I'm watching the DVD of Roughnecks: The Starship Troopers Chronicles. It's a 3D CGI-animated TV series made in 1999-2000 based on Paul Verhoeven's teen sci-fi movie Starship Troopers. To be honest, the visual quality of the animation already looks a little dated, but back in 1999 it blew everyone away. It got me thinking that if *Halo* isn't going to be made into a movie, I reckon it could be a very viable project as a full CG television series.

Watching Roughnecks also got me thinking about the incredible evolution – if not revolution – we've seen in 3D and CGI software. To take this TV series as an example, anyone who works in the field would only have to take a quick look at the modelling, the shading and the effects to identify the software used here as LightWave 3D. In fact, if you took any animation produced around that time, you'd be able to identify the software used just by looking at it, whether the animators were using Maya, 3ds Max or Softimage. Today, if you're watching CGI in movies, TV shows or games, it is much harder to identify the source unless you're a real expert. It's about as difficult as being able to tell whether a particular piece of celluloid was manufactured by Kodak, Fuji or Agfa.

Like any launch these days, the PS3's has been filled with surprises, rumours, conjecture and disappointments – but this time more than ever. Wii ads have been on TV for some time now, but there have been none at all for the PS3

Of course, different software still has its strong and weak points, so it may yet be possible to identify which one has been used, but only if there is a clear clue left by the creator. That in essence has to be a good thing. The purpose of CGI should be to suspend the viewer's sense of disbelief. Ultimately, especially when it comes to movies, we shouldn't even notice it *is* CGI, let alone which piece of software was used to produce it. But it does make things a little boring for those of us involved in creating it. I look back with fond nostalgia to times when we'd be completely taken aback when viewing a video sequence – "What!? It's supposed to be LightWave! How the hell did



Nintendo's Wii has been far more heavily advertised than the PS3 on Japanese television, yet Sony's console has still encouraged a pre-ordering frenzy. This doesn't indicate all that much, especially given the fact that fewer PS3s will be available at launch

they manage to do that? This is so easy to do with Maya and so hard with LightWave!"

It seems that we've lost a certain sense of excitement about the possibilities of the creation process. The dramatic improvement of CGI quality and the global evolution of the industry mean the idea of spending a lot of time and effort on one project using one particular piece of software is now meaningless, when another can deliver the same result much more easily and people won't even notice the difference. The more things change, the more they start to look the same...

And now for something completely different.

At last the release of the next generation of consoles has come. As I write this column we are one week away from the PS3 Japanese launch (November 11) and around a month from the Wii (December 2).

Wii ads have been on TV for some time now but there have been none at all for the PS3. Preorders at Amazon.co.jp for the PS3 ended in just 20 minutes. Why? It's not possible to preorder the console in many cases, only the games. Again, why? Like any major launch these days, the PS3's has been filled with surprises, rumours, conjecture and disappointments – but this time more than ever. As usual, game fans and creators alike are hoping that they'll make the right choice; that the platform they invest in will be the one that takes most of the market share.

The last time we had such a battle for supremacy for next-generation consoles was the standoff between the PS2, the Xbox, the GC and the DC. With this previous generation of contenders there wasn't such a big difference in terms of concepts and design. People found it difficult to see the distinction between one platform and another. So the key to the success of each console was mainly a function of branding and marketing power.

Nowadays, differences in concepts and strategies are much more apparent to consumers. For example, the Xbox 360 is exploring further the online path, the 'future' designed by its predecessor. The PS3 is more than any other platform focused on graphics. The Wii is coming into the market with completely new and appealing ways to enjoy gaming.

Between the PS3 and the Xbox 360 there is of course a struggle for shares of the same market, but both could very well coexist with the Wii. It's a fascinating situation.

I don't think the position will be settled a month after the launches. I guess we'll have to wait for about a year, and I'm pretty sure that by then we will have an interesting map of the gaming market. I wonder who you think is going to win this war – or if anybody can?

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Monster Hunter 3



The rumoured departure of producer Tsuyoshi Tanaka doesn't dim the hope that *Monster Hunter 3* will be the PS3's defining, dino-felling online adventure
PS3, CAPCOM

Silent Hill: Origins



***Silent Hill* on the PSP: the perpetually demonic town you can take anywhere. That is, of course, if developer Climax's internal politics don't derail it before it's released**
PSP, KONAMI

Mr D Goes To Town



No one can stop Mr Domino from bringing his tile-toppling, puzzle-solving adventures to the Wii. Here's hoping the Remote allows for some precision demolition
Wii, MASTIFF

TV go home

Does Live's foray into video have implications for games?



South Park is just one of the shows coming soon to your 360 (although in the US only, initially). One way, at least, of getting some *World Of WarCraft* action on to Microsoft's console.

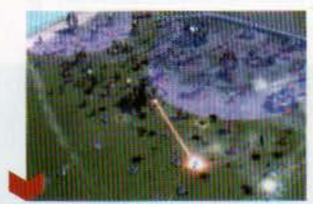
There's no business like showbusiness – except, that is, the games industry. In the mid 20th century, television revolutionised entertainment, bringing media to the masses in unprecedented numbers. Videogames came as an after-effect, fine for kids and those few poor souls who actually took gaming seriously, but not much more than that. It turns out that those same poor souls were on to something, their pastime growing exponentially in a market that now threatens television's dominion of the living room.

Although gamers may feel vindicated, television is still a force to be reckoned with, as Microsoft's recent decision to offer a movie and television on-demand service through Live Marketplace proves. Over the past few years TV networks have grown increasingly nervous over the amount of time gaming takes away from watching scheduled programmes (and ads). Positioning Live in this way signals that gamers are an ideal test-bed – like or not, we fit the mould for being hungry for content.

Showbusiness itself is evolving; the business aspect remains much the same but the public themselves are becoming the show. As Lorne Lanning points out (see p45), sites such as MySpace are providing a social networking dynamic with which games can't yet compete. Because they also involve direct participation (and a blurring of the virtual and real), sites like this successfully replicate the kind of activity games require. So gaming's biggest challenge in establishing itself as a serious contender for monopolising mainstream leisure time may not be the resurrection of old media stalwarts, but the emergence of totally new forms of enjoying ourselves.

Microsoft's decision, and Sony's similar strategy, is to internalise that battle: rather than risking gamers being distracted by their TIVOs or their laptops they're bringing both kinds of content onto their consoles. It may well be a masterstroke, pinning players' attention to their 360s. But – a special irony for Microsoft – it may prove a dangerous Trojan horse, diluting the identity and value of a credible gaming brand the company has invested heavily to create. But with the console's so far disappointing sales (see p20) it may be a risk they can't afford not to take.

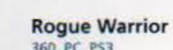










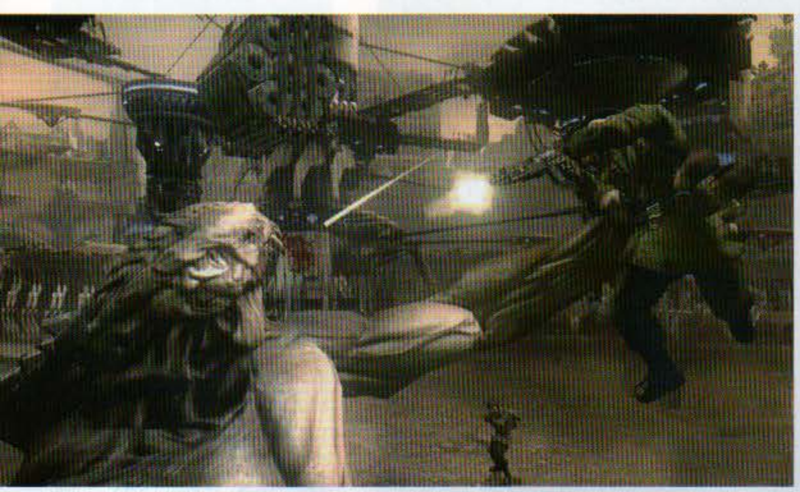




FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEA**
DEVELOPER: **INSOMNIAC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (US), MARCH (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**

Resistance: Fall Of Man

The most credible PS3 launch title reveals the incredible scope of its inventive weapon set. You'll never trust walls again



Although the action graduates from suburban streets to more outlandish environments, none yet seem to offer the perfect synergy between atmosphere and emergent play, instead simply penning the fight in place



The better equipped Chimera are formidable foes, and you'll need to watch for their nasty habit of climbing to their feet again after you'd written them off as dead. Nothing a grenade can't fix, mind



New machines are supposed to bring new experiences, and a few levels into *Resistance* that's exactly what happens. You're standing, catching your breath, in an empty room. One door leads back the way you came, down corridors deserted except for a litter of spent shells and Chimera corpses. The other door, not yet opened, leads onward. And as you stand there, you take a hit. And another, and another. Spinning round, you see the room is still empty and yet there's no denying that you're under fire. A patch of wall squirms into life, and a yellow-white glow burrows through, aiming at your gut. You dodge, line up your sights and, as they flash red, fire your own sabot at a blank piece of plaster. This is war, PS3 style.

Resistance's weapon-set was always going to be what separated it from other FPSes, rather than its English urban settings, bombed into all-too-familiar choke-point corridors, and its obligatory alien enemies, bristling with ugly cliché. And the Auger, with its ability to fire through walls and floors, was always going to be the biggest upsetter. Its slow, gleaming bullets worm their way through obstacles to get to their targets, and on their way are eye-catching enough to give fair warning to those at the end of their trajectory. And if that didn't break enough conventions, its secondary fire mode produces a man-sized shield through which those projectiles can be fired, giving you a few seconds to time your shot. It's almost as overpowered as the sniper rifle that lets you slow down time, so you can pierce the lazy drift of oncoming fire with one decisive bullet and duck back safely into cover. Or the chaingun that also fires a limpet-like minigun emplacement on to any surface. Or the assault rifle that fires round corners. In any other FPS, finding a room thick with enemies is a time to let adrenaline tighten your aim as you pelt from target to target. In *Resistance*, it's a time to let loose your death-dealers and then retire to safety while your dirty work is done unseen. It would be fiercely anticlimactic – isn't the point of an FPS to see your bullets hit, each trigger-squeeze a life-or-death test of skill? – if it weren't for one small point: they have what you have.

So that empty room isn't any safer than the battlefield, as their remote-fire attacks seek you out and pull you back into the fight. It's a genuinely new dynamic – a rare treat in an FPS – and something whose potential is hard to estimate. Although simple accuracy and tactical nouse are still

It's a genuinely new dynamic. Although simple accuracy and tactical nouse are still essential, fights are now strategic, calling you to plan out action sequences



Weapon selection comes via a paused ring-select system, and the heat of battle can be quickly forgotten as you take time to compare ammo stocks of various weapons and consider potential plans of attack







22 grams

Sony has made a lot of mileage out of *Resistance's* file size, and its validation of the need for Blu-ray. But does that 22GB (claimed by Phil Harrison, and later downgraded by Insomniac to 16GB) contain the soul of a PS3 game? On the preview code's showing, it's hard to see where the extra space is going. Texture detail isn't substantially higher than in *Gears Of War*, say, although there may be more, and more varied environments. Cutscenes are either in-engine or based on maps and stills: there's certainly no visual arithmetic saying four times the data means four times the spectacle.

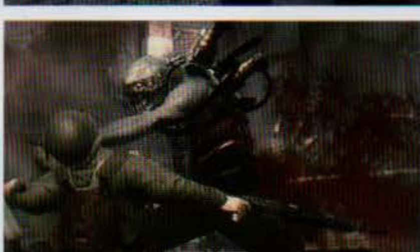




essential, fights are now strategic, calling on you to plan out action sequences more like beat 'em up combos. In the silence of the weapon select menu, with the game automatically paused, you plan your flurry of attacks: a grenade, then one of *those*, a burst of *that*, use my last one of *those* to get that guy out of cover and then let rip with *this*. This isn't *Halo*'s endlessly replayed minute.

Which is all for the best, since *Resistance* – still only available as unfinished preview code as we went to press – struggles to convince on other fronts. The combination of the light Sixaxis pad, loose analogue sticks and lack of rumble dents your sense of physical connection with the world. The structural level design and enemy placement on show so far don't demonstrate any particular flair for creating interesting emergent set-pieces, and the story and dialogue fail to successfully exploit the game's intriguing alternate-history storyline. Other than the wondrously friable window panes, the environments, although fully physics-modelled (there's an entertaining 20 minutes to be had out of using shotgun fire to nudge a snooker ball from one end of a war-torn room to another), feel inert and empty. AI too, feels unresponsive, despite the Chimeras' willingness to roll away from grenades and towards cover.

Multiplayer is the other great unknown: 40-player matches will create many millions of alternate fire combinations, and test imagination as surely as skill. The question is, with familiar, solidly-produced experiences like *Call Of Duty 3* on offer, whether players will be as willing to learn new tricks as they expect their new consoles to be.



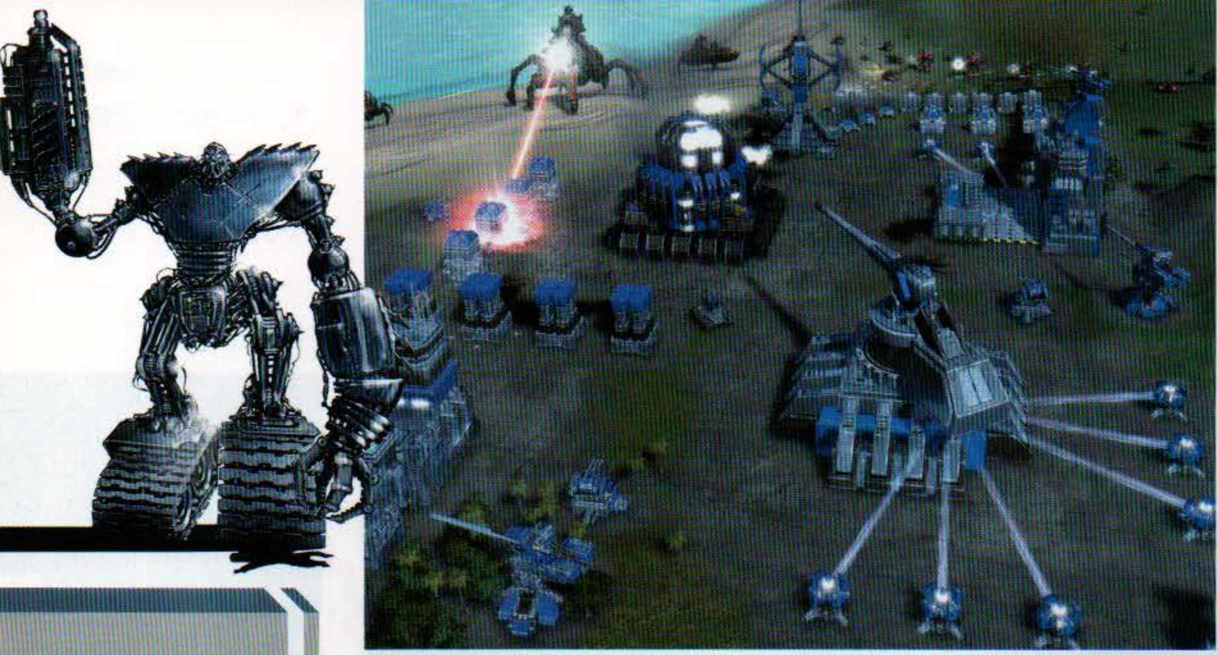
The Chimera plague which has engulfed Europe – leaving the way clear for the Yanks to save the day – isn't just bipedal. Other forms provide perfectly challenging targets for *Resistance*'s unique weapon set: scuttling scorpions pouring forth in waves, weird amphibians leaping stickily from wall to wall, and vast mutations crashing boss-like into battle





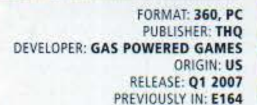


Resistance's tour of duty takes it from York to Manchester, Nottingham, Grimsby and London. Each isn't quite as recognisable as you might hope, but thanks to the restrained palette used in each location, a muted colour-coding makes each environment immediately distinctive – if not especially memorable









FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **GAS POWERED GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2007**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**

Supreme Commander

You may not have previously considered nostalgia a substance at risk of exploding. Prepare to reconsider



Supreme Commander's **flexible control system allows two separate armies to arrive at a single destination as one: perfect for a synchronous assault**



Air superiority demands massive investment, and a sacrifice in ground attack power. The reward: the ability to strike any point on the map at a time of your choosing

You can store five nukes in a single silo in *Supreme Commander*. That's not an incidental fact; it's a hallmark.

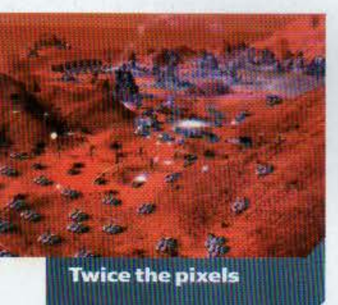
It's been just under ten long years since Chris Taylor's last realtime strategy game. Since then, the genre has changed – it's moved to 3D, and become the PC's genre of default for online gaming. It's produced games that allow for direct line of sight, multiple tech-trees, physically simulated damage models, resource models that rely on rate of production rather than stockpiles, emergent destruction and dynamically modelled projectiles. It's come a long, long way since 1997. And yet, by finally nailing all these features, Taylor's competitors have only just caught up with him. Ten long years of waiting for someone to come along and move past *Total Annihilation*.

Yet, somehow, *Supreme Commander* doesn't quite feel like the super-strong sequel that's been so keenly anticipated. Sure, there's innovation, particularly in the interface. Players can now practically automate their build queues from moment one of a match; they can set elaborate, stretched-out way-points for complex flanking manoeuvres; they can even co-ordinate their attacks to strike at a single moment. And the game has a real sense of character. While the three sides share units at the base of the tech tree, once you're fighting in the upper echelons, you're granted access to some extraordinary weaponry. Take the Spider Bot – 20-odd storeys of metal might, its legs skewering and exploding any of the baby bots beneath. Or there's the Colossus: an even taller robot with a giant laser for an eye. Or the UFO that's going to hover above your base with its death ray, oblivious to your air defences.

But there remains a problem: maybe *TA* was too far ahead of its time. Because *Supreme Commander* doesn't feel like a brave new step for the genre – it feels like a retrospective, a return to genius. If you're a *TA* veteran then you've played this, loved this before. You've slumped through these day-long LAN matches, trading artillery barrages, sent wave after wave of light-tanks against impregnable defences, you've sourced metal from the mess. You've done *all* this before. *Supreme Commander* is eerily familiar.

But perhaps the explosions will be compensation enough. In *Supreme Commander's* simulated strategy, there is no need to limit a side to just the one weapon.

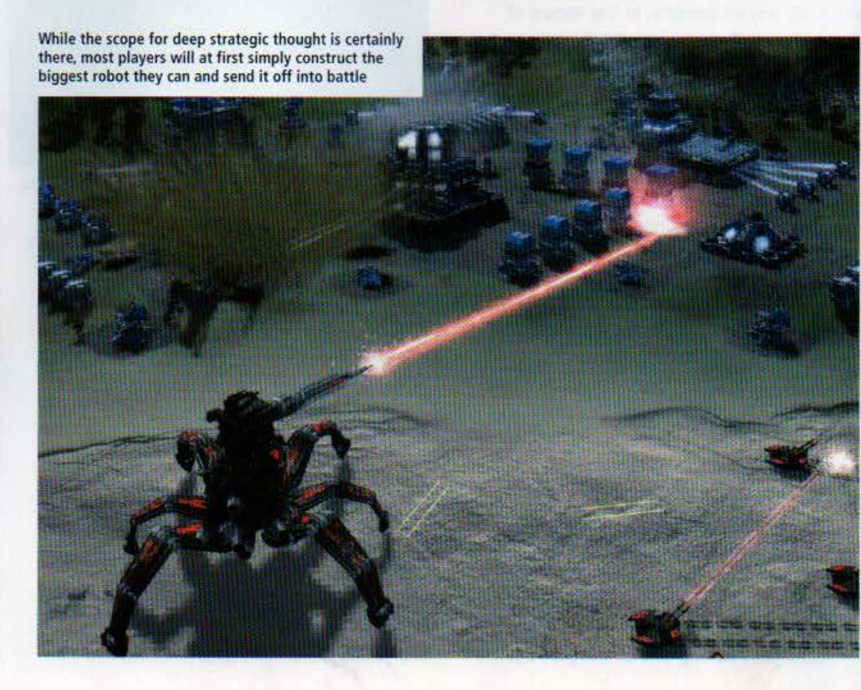
There are no caps, no artificial limits on the things you can create, and where you can place them. Charge 'em up, and let 'em rip. They'll arc through the sky, a bright cross on your radar, a high-pitched whine through your speakers. Boom. Bang. It is as spectacular as you'd expect. And, of course, you have four more in the bank. Launching… now.



Twice the pixels

One feature Gas Powered Games is keen to promote is the dual monitor support. Dedicated players can hook up a second screen, which can be easily adapted to a level-wide radar. Gone is the awkward mini-map, replaced with a lush, constantly pinging, data-filled display – one that you can swing your mouse over, select units and order attacks from. The fantasy of realtime strategy games is that you are in control of an army: this novel use of tech brings that one step closer.

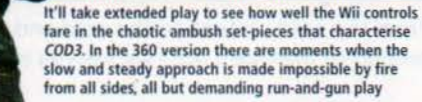
While the scope for deep strategic thought is certainly there, most players will at first simply construct the biggest robot they can and send it off into battle





Call Of Duty 3

Remote control brings the Wii version's combat closer to hand than ever



It'll take extended play to see how well the Wii controls fare in the chaotic ambush set-pieces that characterise *COD3*. In the 360 version there are moments when the slow and steady approach is made impossible by fire from all sides, all but demanding run-and-gun play

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **TREYARCH**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q4 2006**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E166, E168**





Vehicle sections, such as the introduction of a Polish tank commander as a supporting playable character, switch to unique Wii control

Played on the 360, *Call Of Duty 3* is characterised by a barrage of wartime white noise so unrelenting that it even follows you, momentarily, into the pause menu with a tinnitus ring – a constant spur between shellshocked inaction and frantic movement. On Wii it's the same game, its levels recreated exactly, and yet the controls make for a subtle revolution. It's become a more cautious, practiced battle, almost conveying that you're a veteran inured to the chaos, not just an FPS veteran given a more precise aiming device.

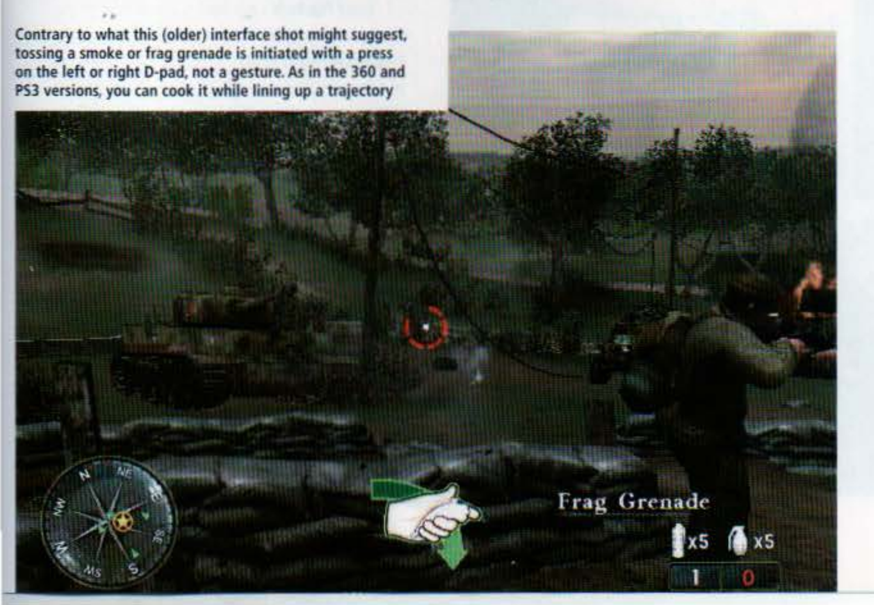
The Remote is, as expected, as tuned a tool as you could ask for shy of a lightgun, finding a balance of calibration between the heft of analogue sticks and the supernatural agility of a mouse. When using it to aim down the iron sight of a rifle there's a remarkable sense of connection – enough to override the game's fuzzy portrayal of whether or not hits are registering – that encourages tense crouch-and-snipe firefights, with leaning smartly mapped to twists of the Remote. Though perfectly workable in stand-up firefights, the Wii's controls lend themselves to an instinctive cycle of finding cover, sighting and returning fire – more so than its beefier console cousins' urges to wild, bullet-spraying response.

There's a similar level of restraint in *COD3*'s controls, a welcome surprise given that launch technology fervour (or indeed western developers' record with the DS) veers between token or excessive translation to gestures. Stance-shifting and grenades remain on buttons, while weapon-cycling and reload benefit from a sharp Nunchuk flick. Thrusting the Remote forward to melee feels slightly divorced from the resulting stock-whip – better suiting a bayonet that the series' sanitised violence couldn't allow – but the game's only real control misstep is in its QTE-style Battle Action sequences.

Trading button-mashing for a bout of uncomfortable palms-out controller-paddling is no less awkward, especially as the gestures (a second controllers-together downward clubbing motion at least feels the part) aren't analogous to the hand-to-hand struggle on screen. We're assured other sequences are more obvious and enjoyable, such as rowing a boat in to land, but it's likely Treyarch has made its best use of motion sensitivity enlivening the shooter's most regular act.

It's a backhanded compliment, but *COD3*'s confidence all but guarantees Wii will, in time, have its *GoldenEye*. While we wait for that perfect marriage of controller, console and creator, a military shooter port could prove an unlikely standard-bearer for Nintendo's difference.

Contrary to what this (older) interface shot might suggest, tossing a smoke or frag grenade is initiated with a press on the left or right D-pad, not a gesture. As in the 360 and PS3 versions, you can cook it while lining up a trajectory





Full circle

Despite its PC roots, *Call Of Duty* is now often perceived as a console shooter, and it's likely that the PS3 and 360 (above) incarnations of this version (reviewed on p81) will take the lion's share of the attention, not least as a litmus test of how cross-platform titles perform on Sony's new machine versus Microsoft's older model. While similar visual comparisons with the Wii version are tempting, they're ultimately futile since the mouse-like precision of the control scheme produces a distinct experience, and one which brings the game back a little closer to its roots.

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2007**

Lost Planet: Extreme Condition

From the cold undead to the cold and nearly dead, the second of Inafune's 360 exclusives is just as pressurised



Absolute zero to hero

Although you're equipped with a grapple that can be widely used, it only comes into its own in situations that can be approached from a number of angles. These often present themselves in encounters with human enemies – the Snow Pirates – rather than with the larger Akrid, where it's unlikely you'll be making the first move. Weapon-wise, there's a persistent dual-wielding structure that uses both triggers, whether it be on-foot, riding in a Vital Suit walker, or shooting from the precarious comfort of a rocket emplacement. On foot, two weapons can be carried for right-trigger firing, with one of a variety of grenades launched using the left.



Lost Planet **features around a dozen missions, each available for replay. Each stage features 'Target Marks' to be hunted down across its four difficulty levels, and, atypically, Easy mode will be available from the start, if the preview code is to be believed**

While it can easily seem that *Lost Planet*, a soberly snowbound, jogging-speed thirdperson shooter, has nothing in common with black comedy beat 'em up *Dead Rising*, they share more than just their status as high-profile Japanese 360 games – commitments to a console that's received a frostier reception than the one waiting for those who brave this game. The premise is the same: cornered and desperate humanity, fighting itself as well as a hive-force foe, and a life-or-death need to keep on the move – but instead of *Dead Rising*'s clock and crowds causing the stress, here it's constant exposure. And it's not just because of your ever-decreasing thermal energy rating (which, to double the tension, is used to recharge health after taking damage). When outdoors, the more barren the landscape, the bigger the prehistoric-style Akrid monstrosity that's likely to burst out of it; and when indoors, typical shooter claustrophobia sees corridors turn to crawlspaces when the Akrid get involved.

Their aggression is rammed home in a literally unstoppable manner in the game's opening stretch, where a squad exploring a facility is scattered by the arrival of an enormous stegosaurus-like Akrid that uses its bulk to turn walls into floors. Escape is the only apparent option, something required again two stages later when a trip across a vast frozen flatland sees a gigantic burrower turning the scene into a white screen of death for anyone not already fleeing. It's not as if the many forms of Akrid don't have obvious weak spots. Easy to see but often hazardous to get a clean shot at, glowing thermal sacs sit on top of the Akrid troops' rock-like armour. Shooting them truly feels like you're hitting where it hurts, the sacs crackling like shattered glass, turning from warm orange to an angry red.





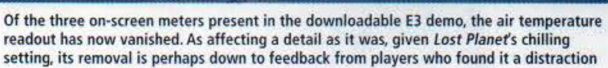


After the thick bodies and pug-faces of *Dead Rising*'s living cast, *Lost Planet* offers leaner, less-exaggerated characters whose humanity, thanks to the heavy clothing they wear in the field, seems visible only in cutscenes

Lost Planet's combat system doesn't come with many instructions, but it does have plenty to teach, thanks to its aiming mechanic. The bumper buttons sweep the camera through right angles, and a rectangular dead zone in the centre of the screen allows for a more flexible aim while strafing, but using the two in comfortable unison is something that needs adjusting to. What's as clear in the rest of the game as in those controls is that the experience *Lost Planet* is looking to offer is one that plays at its own peculiar pace; and if that's not a convincing differential, the sheer scale and intensity of its creature-feature showdowns will be. But – as always – the half-life of the appeal of such Hollywood-style fury and slickness will be what dictates *Lost Planet*'s worth.







Of the three on-screen meters present in the downloadable E3 demo, the air temperature readout has now vanished. As affecting a detail as it was, given *Lost Planet*'s chilling setting, its removal is perhaps down to feedback from players who found it a distraction

Marvel Universe Online

We'd all love to web sling, but will Marvel's MMO actually let you do it?

FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **CRYPTIC STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBA**



DCSoft

DC and Marvel's eye-for-an-eye rivalry is historically entrenched, though each publisher has managed to successfully differentiate their respective comic book universes to amazing degrees. That spirit of competition is set to continue as DC also has its own MMO in the works – a game to be published by none other than Sony Online Entertainment, meaning that both Sony and Microsoft will also directly compete in the online superhero stakes. The only thing known about DC's offering is that it will be overseen by artist Jim Lee – something of a head start as no comparable industry luminaries are yet publicly attached to the Marvel project.

Make Mine Marvel! is a phrase NCSoft probably doesn't want to hear right now. At the beginning of 2005, Marvel filed a lawsuit claiming intellectual property infringement by NCSoft's *City Of Heroes/Villains* series. To the amazement of some and jubilation of others the comic book publisher lost the case, thus forcing them to come to an arrangement that cost much more in dollars than it did in hurt pride. Post-trial, both companies came to an amicable understanding in which they reiterated their respect for each other. And that was the end of that.

Except that now Marvel is ploughing its own furrow into the MMO market, and commandeering *Heroes/Villains* developer Cryptic to boot. Never one to miss out on investing in a tried and tested formula,



With this phenomenal level of intellectual property at stake, it would have been nice to have actually seen some of the game, but at present all that's been revealed is a CG trailer showcasing some iconic Marvel characters

Microsoft has also joined the fold as publisher – a coup for all involved. Cryptic has been understandably cagey about the details of balancing both game worlds – it is still contracted to create new content for NCSoft for the foreseeable future. That *Marvel Universe Online* will be available through Live obviously plays to its advantage, expanding the superhero MMO concept to include console owners will broaden the appeal of both the game and genre. In its PC iteration the title is being released under Microsoft's Games For Windows brand: whether cross-platform gamers will be able to play together is not yet known.

Quite how the gameplay will pan out is something of a mystery. If playable characters are strictly restricted to those in Marvel's repertoire then each separate game area will be a decidedly small 'universe' – multiplayer by definition, but hardly massive. Custom-made characters seem to be a workable solution to this issue, but would irrevocably dilute the source material and resemble nothing so much as NCSoft's own heroic MMO. All of which leaves a third, equally problematic option: the prospect of innumerable Spider-Men and Hulks roaming through the game, armies of Things and Dr Dooms lining up to trade blows, literally Multiple Man multiplied. Then there's the issue of weightings – is it really fair to pit the



It will please the Marvel faithful to see that a large array of characters have been included in the trailer – everyone knows Spider-Man and Captain America, but many are yet to be introduced to the joys of Uatu and Galactus

intergalactic Silver Surfer against the human Punisher, for example? How is it conceptually possible to upgrade superpowers? For that matter, who gets to play as who and why?

Currently everything is pure speculation. Information is slowly being drip fed by Cryptic as details solidify, but it will certainly take a great deal of thought and care on the developer's part to convincingly leverage a satisfying Marvel experience with the heaviness of fan expectations.

Pragmatic considerations aside, there's enough scope in Marvel's densely populated history to provide a rewarding online experience. It's not hard to imagine a framework drawing on similar lines to *World Of WarCraft's* persistent conflict, pitting treacherous villainy against valiant heroism. Comics lovers have long awaited a superhero gaming event that definitively encompasses their passion without patronising them. If *Marvel Universe Online* can provide that, all power to it.



Marcinko's (left) involvement is a central claim to authenticity, but adds little past prodigiously inventive swearing (sample: "What a fucking goat fuck!") – not in itself enough to distinguish this from its competitors



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA**
DEVELOPER: **ZOMBIE STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q2 2007**

Rogue Warrior

Nuclear issues aside, is there really any reason to revisit the DPRK?

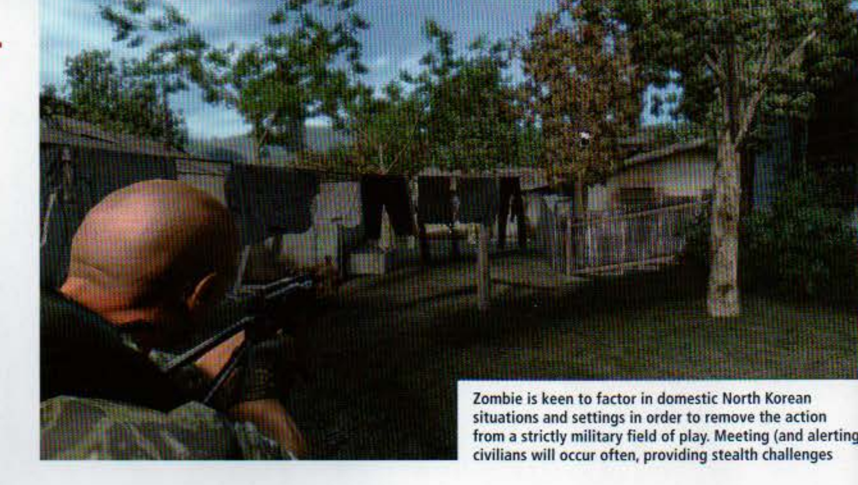
"If it's broke, you broke it, asshole!" barked Navy SEAL turned author **Richard Marcinko** at *Rogue Warrior*'s recent unveiling in Las Vegas. He was alluding not to the game's producer, but to his own personal method for disciplining troops in combat. If its publisher's rhetoric is to be believed, *Rogue Warrior* (based on Marcinko's bestselling series of memoirs and novels) is an attempt to bring a new level of precision and authenticity to the tactical FPS. Yet if the game is emblematic of anything, it's how central the acquisition of economically 'safe' franchise concepts are if mid-sized publishers are to survive this generation. Just as *Saints Row* plundered *GTA* for its HD inspiration, so this game borrows *Ghost Recon*'s gameplay template and setting – a lot for Bethesda to pin its hopes on given the strength of Ubisoft's tactical shooter legacy.

Stuck behind enemy lines in an imaginary conflict in North Korea, you play the irascible Marcinko himself. Your overall objective is to make it through various groups of enemy troops to reach the US-friendly South Korea. You maintain full command over your unit through use of a strangely familiar trigger system, which you'll need to master to overcome panicky Korean infantrymen.

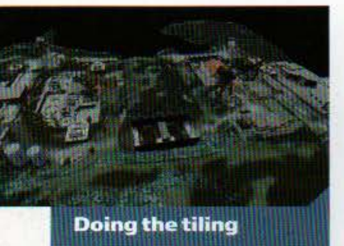
Underpinned by Unreal Engine 3, environments are beautifully mapped, drawn and rendered and are able to muster up the kind of imposing, depressing misery North Koreans have to endure daily in the name of Kim Jong Il's repressive regime. Elemental effects such as fire and water have had special attention lavished upon them and succeed in convincing that, by the time this game is released next year, its visuals will be up to the task of holding their own against contemporaneous products.

Much was made of the quality of the overarching AI system, not least the concept of a 'freeform battlefield' in which players can tackle objectives via a number of routes. However, the linearity of heavily scripted events undid many of these claims and seemed instead to reflect the corridor-heavy preferences of the game's inspirations. That said, much of the throat-slitting, close-quarter combat looks strategically satisfying, even if trip-alarm systems and hierarchical unit dynamics have been played out elsewhere many times before.

It's often said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but Zombie's game contains a few too many Red Storm flashbacks for comfort. In the graphical realisation of this title, in its sturdy (but predictable) AI and its dark, oppressive scenario, there's absolutely no reason to doubt that it'll turn out as a solidly competent FPS. What's problematic is how determinedly imitative it is; from its hand-waving healing animations to the troop-rallying reticule, from the dystopian future North Korea to its strategic ammunition pick-ups. Wherever it goes from here, the fact remains that Richard Marcinko, in publishing terms at least, is no match for Tom Clancy. Likewise, even at this embryonic stage, it seems probable that the *Rogue Warrior* franchise will turn out to pose no credible threat to *Ghost Recon*.



Zombie is keen to factor in domestic North Korean situations and settings in order to remove the action from a strictly military field of play. Meeting (and alerting) civilians will occur often, providing stealth challenges



Doing the tiling

Multiplayer is by far the most original and technically accomplished aspect of the game. Players can drop in and out of online play whenever they choose at the touch of a button, with the CPU claiming control of their character in between. An intriguing tile-based map system allows players to choose only the first and last map tiles, while the middle tile is randomly assigned and rotates once every two hours, changing the contour of both the landscape and gameplay. Although this latter concept is clever, it stops short of random level generation.



No visible HUD is present in the demo, though whether this will be replicated in-game or has just not yet been developed isn't yet clear. Interface simplification is a stated priority, but having no ammunition, equipment or health counters might be a step too far even for seasoned tactical FPS players



Rayman's various minigames all belong to the same, recognisable world. The ease with which the developers conjure up vivid scenes from deserts to mountain ranges is a testament to their knowledge of the *Rayman* licence

FORMAT: **Wii, PS2**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **DECEMBER 8**

Rayman: Raving Rabbids

Rayman bursts on to the Wii with the best of intentions, but will Raving Rabbids leave you shaken or stirred?

While the Wii may seem like the biggest gamble Nintendo has taken since the Virtual Boy, there's at least one application for it that feels like a safe bet – minigames. Ubisoft clearly thinks so, and a measure of its certainty is the serious IP it's willing to stake.

Raving Rabbids drops the series' trademark platforming in favour of more than 70 different minigames, as Rayman takes on challenges to entertain a horde of rabbit invaders. Ubisoft has created a wide variety of games, with pigs to be milked and rabbits to be flung out of speeding minecarts. All focus on diverse uses of the Wii's controller: spinning it like a lasso, aiming it like a shotgun, or using it as a pen.

Graphically, *Raving Rabbids* is pure GameCube, but the visual style is still beautifully judged. The Rabbids exude character – furry embodiments of sheer id, with pinched mouths and crafty eyes – and the environments are full of life and detail. The one area where the game seems certain to excel is in the quality of its visual feedback: embarrassed animals squeal as their toilet cubicles burst open in the door-slamming game, or shudder with hunger as you trace food for them. This is a game that manages to reward and punish the player with great charisma – unsurprising, given that it comes from the developers of *Beyond Good And Evil* and *King Kong*.

But Ubisoft's bet may not be as sound as it seems. A significant problem with the current build is that the game remains much more fun to watch than it is to play. Too many challenges fail to live up to the promise of their inputs, even if they are beautifully presented. Seeing someone swing a cow around the screen by spinning the remote suggests more fun than the act itself delivers: while controls can break a game, they can't make one on their own, and *Raving Rabbids* is currently lacking that special glue that binds the onscreen action with the interface.

Some of the minigames, however, show real promise. A lazy skydive through a succession of coloured rings suggests carefree afternoons spent playing *Pilotwings*, and the multiplayer, which is available for around 50 of the games, is consistently entertaining, if physically draining.

The success or otherwise of *Rayman: Raving Rabbids* lies in the balance. While there's no doubting the sincerity of Ubisoft's intentions, the main problem may well be that the developer has approached Nintendo's console from a perspective that focuses mainly on its novelty value. It's a dangerous mistake, and suggests that quick-fix gaming may prove to be a harder balancing act for the Wii than many have realised.

Without *Wario* at launch, Ubisoft's game may still be the best means of showing off the wacky potential of the Wii to a roomful of friends. It demonstrates the console at its most accessible, even if a deeper engagement may reveal it to be the kind of game that unwittingly gives Nintendo's new machine a bad reputation.



Raving releases

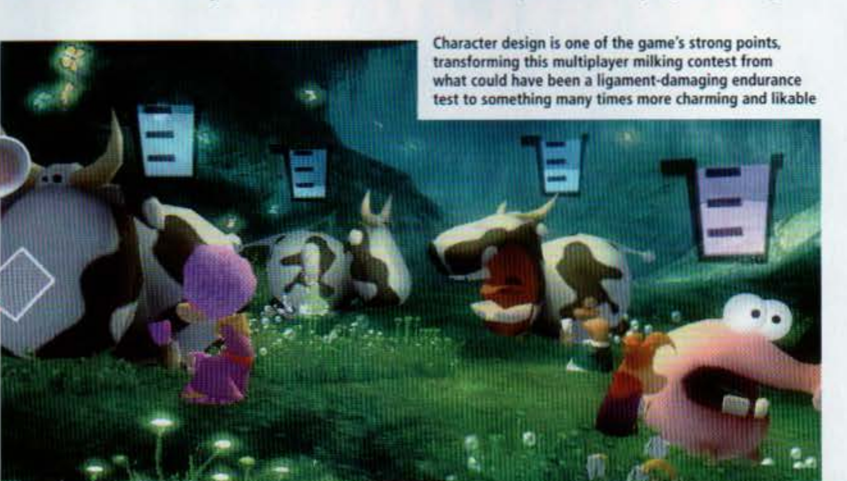
Astonishingly, *Raving Rabbids* is also pencilled in for a PS2 release, which defies all logic other than that of the marketplace. Taking a game so closely bound to the Wii controller and attempting to map it to the inputs of a DualShock seems like a thankless, if not self-defeating, task and unlikely to gain admirers. Wisely, the forthcoming handheld versions have chosen to dispense with the minigame formula and offer up a traditional platform challenge instead.





The on-rails FPS sections turn *Raving Rabbids* into a kind of quick-fix *Time Crisis*. Usually taking no more than three minutes to complete, they are full of invention, and are also available in multiplayer

Character design is one of the game's strong points, transforming this multiplayer milking contest from what could have been a ligament-damaging endurance test to something many times more charming and likable



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **MISTWALKER/FEEL+**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2007**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E160**

Lost Odyssey

First showings of the 360's bleak epic suggest its mechanics are as ancient and undying as its hero







Odyssey intersperses gameplay segments into its FMV sequences, and while the drop in visual quality is flatteringly slight, the abrupt halt of all action for blow-by-blow combat hardly helps suspend your disbelief

Please, don't mention *Final Fantasy*!" laughs Microsoft's great white hope, **Hironobu Sakaguchi**. "Yes, I made *FF* all my life, and so it's probably not surprising that *Lost Odyssey* feels like it. But in many ways this is what I wanted *FF* to be."

Even without rebel *FFXII* for comparison, it's clear that Sakaguchi's program for change hasn't involved game structure: *Odyssey* is wilfully classical, spurning even an active turn-based system for its line-up-and-knock-down combat. With only the Tokyo Game Show demo – missing what we're told are two key combat features – to go on, it's too early to comment on the system's emptiness. Although with one feature pegged to be stealing enemy abilities, there's little scent of revolution.

What *LO* does offer to escalate is the maturity of its storytelling. This is not so convincingly portrayed in its opening battle scenes, which are predictably colour-leeched and bloodthirsty, but hinted at in the iciness of its immortal lead. Every inch the CG poster-boy (Sakaguchi has reunited some of his ex-Square Pictures staff for the game's 3D modelling), it's one of the first next-gen games to expertly subvert the Uncanny Valley, using its dislocation to spell out that this *is* a man apart from the world.

Of nine playable characters, only four are immortal, setting the stage for either real pathos or just the gaming tragedy of losing your best items. With Asian versions promised an all-star voice cast and European versions hopefully following suit ("We haven't decided the English voices yet," admits Sakaguchi), perhaps a big-budget downer will prove genre-defying enough after all.



At the intro's conclusion, Kaim survives the obliteration of both sides in the battle he was fighting, much to the distrust of the stragglers that discover him. A recurring theme is to be the downside of an unending existence



After a prolonged learning period grappling with the intricacies of the Unreal Engine, *Odyssey*'s teams are finally showing the visual success (and refreshingly un-Unreal looks) that eluded Namco with *Frame City Killer*

Blue Dragon

Living, breathing manga – but this dragon's more roar than bite

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **MISTWALKER/ARTOON**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **DECEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E160**





When asked if *Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey* are intentionally polar opposites in theme, Sakaguchi corrects us: "Don't be fooled by the colourful and cute visuals – the scenario is just as dramatic as *Lost Odyssey*'s, and if it delivers, I hope the game will provide just as intense an emotional experience"

If *Dead Or Alive* was the Xbox's otaku gateway game, it's this reuniting of producer **Hironobu Sakaguchi** and manga artist Akira Toriyama – their first significant pairing since *Chrono Trigger* – that could break Microsoft's new machine out of the bedroom in Japan. While Sakaguchi has made no secret of his desire to create an innovative RPG, neither he nor Microsoft made any secret that *Blue Dragon* isn't it.

So *BD*'s strongest appeal is a visual one, seemingly sculpted from clay rather than moulded from next-gen plastic. "Toriyama works like a 3D modeller," Sakaguchi says. "He went deep into the creation of this world. With his designs, he thinks about what's behind or what's inside, so it's easy to model from them. I really could credit him in the game as a 3D modeller." Cutscenes, field exploration and battle sequences all use the same fidelity of in-game engine, successively smoothed and soft-lit into looking very much the part of a second-generation 360 title.

How far sugar-coating a familiar pill will go outside of its target audience is another matter – although beating the more experimental next-gen Japanese RPGs to market by at least a year should work in its favour. *BD*'s certainly not regressive: enemies can at least be seen and avoided while travelling, although combat's menu-driven face-off holds no surprises, with even the shadow dragon effects seemingly only a candy-coated super-attack. In fact, the most startling feature in the game so far is the use of a Deep Purple number during a boss fight – further confirmation that despite *BD*'s youthful looks, it's old at heart.





While the supporting cast fill out traditional RPG roles, *Blur Dragon*'s hero has the ability to interact with the remnants of the technologically-advanced civilisation that preceded the game's events. It's unclear from what we have seen if this is simply a plot device – designed to bring him into conflict with the villain of the piece – or if it has its own gameplay implications

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2007**

Kabu Trader Shun

Capcom encourages you to get rich quick with its new stock trading battle RPG



There appears to be a more serious strategic sim element underlying the adventuring gameplay – a sort of resource-management RPG. Environments also seem extremely clean, crisp and clear for DS backdrops

Phoenix Wright set in motion a global phenomenon few perform in public: shouting at the DS. Capitalising on the lawyer's success, Capcom has been quick to extend the concept to another high-adrenaline workplace: stock trading. Armed with the two most common commands in the trader's vocabulary (buy and sell) the game sets you the task of defeating less able opponents in order to climb to the top of the trading ladder. Making the largest amount of money in the shortest possible time is its ultimate aim, an accurate reflection, perhaps, of our cash obsessed society.

Kabu Trader Shun retains *Phoenix Wright*'s anime stylistics, but diversifies the gameplay by abandoning the simple structure. Instead, an adventure-based story will force you to seek out opponents to assess, challenge and overcome with your financial expertise. As the game progresses, you'll learn a variety of combos (whether these are speech or touchscreen commands is not clear) to help you to continually upgrade your status. A versus mode will allow competitive brokers to square off.



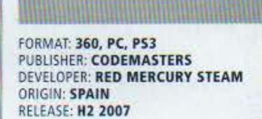
Capcom isn't the only (listed) company to see potential in the trading game market – Konami has drafted in none other than Kojima Productions to piece together an instructional *Cooking Mama*-style training title based on the in and outs of stock market ephemera. If this all sounds rather dry, the benchmark will be set by how much fun the format is to actually play. The fact that something as obtuse as stock trading is making it into the gaming mainstream is indicative of one thing above all: we're all capitalists now.



Quite what's going on here is unclear, though an Enron-style scandal would certainly add an incentive to make sensible and ethical trading decisions

Clive Barker's Jericho

The prolific horror guru intends to bring his own brand of hellraising to next-gen



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **RED MERCURY STEAM**
ORIGIN: **SPAIN**
RELEASE: **H2 2007**

Anyone who suffered the Amiga's exasperating *Clive Barker's Nightbreed* will be excused for wanting to steer clear of the Liverpudlian horror writer's gaming output. Although the return of Barker was fairly well received with 2001's *Undying*, mediocre sales led to EA prematurely canning the brand. *Jericho* is an opportunity to re-establish a games industry presence while, to some extent, clearing Barker's name.

Perhaps the problem in the past has been that Barker's unique brand of dark fantasy has translated into games that err on the side of the fantastical rather than the dark – a strange disparity given that the reverse is true of the writer's film work. From early screens, *Jericho* seems intent on reversing that trend: sinewy undead skeletal ghouls have the potential to terrify, while the grimily organic set pieces seem genuinely threatening. But these are still very early days and only time will reveal if reality lives up to these horrific renderings.

Gameplay specifics are still sketchy at present, but a threadbare plot outline suggests a traditional FPS dynamic set around a survival horror scenario. The Spanish developer, Red Mercury Steam, is also something of an unknown quantity, though having previously collaborated with American McGee will have primed it for working with a twisted worldview.

Peter Jackson once said that it took almost 100 years for cinematic effects to catch up with Tolkien's imagination. Perhaps the same is true of Clive Barker and gaming, and maybe, just maybe, this new hardware generation wil deliver the machines able to do his macabre vision justice.

Firstperson melee combat has lately become a more refined genre: let's hope *Jericho* can meet its standards





Something tells us that conventional human weaponry wouldn't do much good against *Jericho*'s eternal demonic evil

A rested



development

After a year out of the spotlight, a rejuvenated Lorne Lanning returns to explain why he left the games industry behind – and why he didn't leave gaming

As co-founder (with Sherry McKenna) of Oddworld Inhabitants, **Lorne Lanning** steered the idiosyncratic *Oddworld* cycle for a decade and two hardware generations, culminating in the exceptional *Stranger's Wrath*. But after hinting at the development of a new title, *Citizen Siege*, Oddworld Inhabitants withdrew from internal game development – choosing to focus on combining CG film and videogame projects. *Citizen Siege* has recently entered production under animated feature developer Vanguard, and with development of the game to follow, we talked to the reliably outspoken Lanning about gaming's new frontiers.

How did your relationship with Vanguard for Citizen Siege come about?
I'll give you a little history since CAA [Creative Arts Agency] deserve the credit – Larry Shapiro from CAA saw *Abe's Oddysee* in a theatre at E3 '96 or '97, and that's when he decided to get more involved with videogames – when he believed they could tell stories. Abe had that cinematic flair that really said: 'This could happen not only in a movie, but in gameplay too'. Close to five years ago, he said he'd really like to represent us at CAA. And that was the beginning of our relationship that, in all honesty, hasn't amounted to much for them for years [laughs].

Larry believed in Oddworld all these years; we had been approached by other agents in other Hollywood studios, but we were looking for our own movies, in full CG. I didn't want to direct other people's projects – I wanted to have our concepts financed, and that I would direct. And that's quite a leap of faith. But CAA fully believed in it, and we've been astounded by the commitment that they've had to the future, where videogame talent will arise and how that will help change the face of media.

How seriously is the creative vision taken in the film industry, compared to working in the games industry and with publishers?

It's completely polar. The film industry is a brutal industry, we're not naïve about that, but talent is respected and revered. It doesn't mean you're given a blank cheque, but it is understood that you can offer something that other people can't. And that... does it exist in the games industry? The other day, I heard my friend who runs a major development studio in the US – he's in his 50s and has been running studios since he was 25 – say: 'The new publisher just sent down their new 22-year-old boy to tell me what to do'. And that's just classic games industry, in that it hasn't yet realised what individual vision can truly bring to a project, because we're still in a fully teamsport corporate mode. We became packaged goods before we established ourselves as an artform, or a vehicle for expression.



Do you think people like you and the work you do are undervalued by the industry they serves?

Games are not going to go away, and will only get more and more interesting, and more talented people are going to become more interested in them. Yet it's going to be a painfully slow growth because of the nature of the medium, and the nature of the business. Talent complains full-time, it's just a non-stop onslaught of complaints from talent; but the games industry sees everyone as expendable, and I think that will change as the value of individual talent becomes more and more recognised. Clearly, Will Wright is, and Miyamoto has been, but how many people do we not hear about?

Is that contributing to the distance between critical reception of a title like Stranger's Wrath and the impact it made?

Well, that was simply because of promotion. Because there were no marketing dollars behind *Stranger's Wrath* – and that was a business decision on behalf of EA – that choice sealed the sales. It still sold over half a million units, but people don't buy $50 entertainment products if they don't know what they are. And they didn't have an opportunity to know about *Stranger's Wrath*; so what that told us was that we need to swim in bigger ponds. We don't want to invest three years of our life to just have a publisher abandon our title. If our game's not on all the right platforms, or if a publisher neglects their half of the deal, are you just going to keep on living by the business practices of the industry? And our answer was: 'No, we're better than that.'

"The games industry sees everyone as expendable, and I think that will change as the value of individual talent becomes more and more recognised"



I don't mean that in any pompous way – if *Abe's Oddysee* was a movie, it would still be on the shelves of Blockbuster, but because it was a game, no one even has a PlayStation hooked up any more. So it's a question of the lifespan of your work – many people remember and love Abe from over ten years ago, which is phenomenal for a game. Whereas if that type of impact were made as a movie, it would be an entirely different ball game that would open up your options tremendously.

Another issue is that through each hardware transition, we're basically on a tools focus, and not a content focus. There's a huge chasm between what the development community wants and what the big boys, the hardware manufacturers, are currently building. It's absurd, and reduces the innovative output that creatives have in gaming. So, if I had games as a sole focus of my time and energy, my stories are always mulched down to get it to run on whatever technology we were using at the time. It's 80 per cent a technical challenge, and 20 per cent a content challenge. And at the end of the day, we're more content people than technology people.

Do you not feel steps towards backwards compatibility are extending the lifespan of legacy titles?

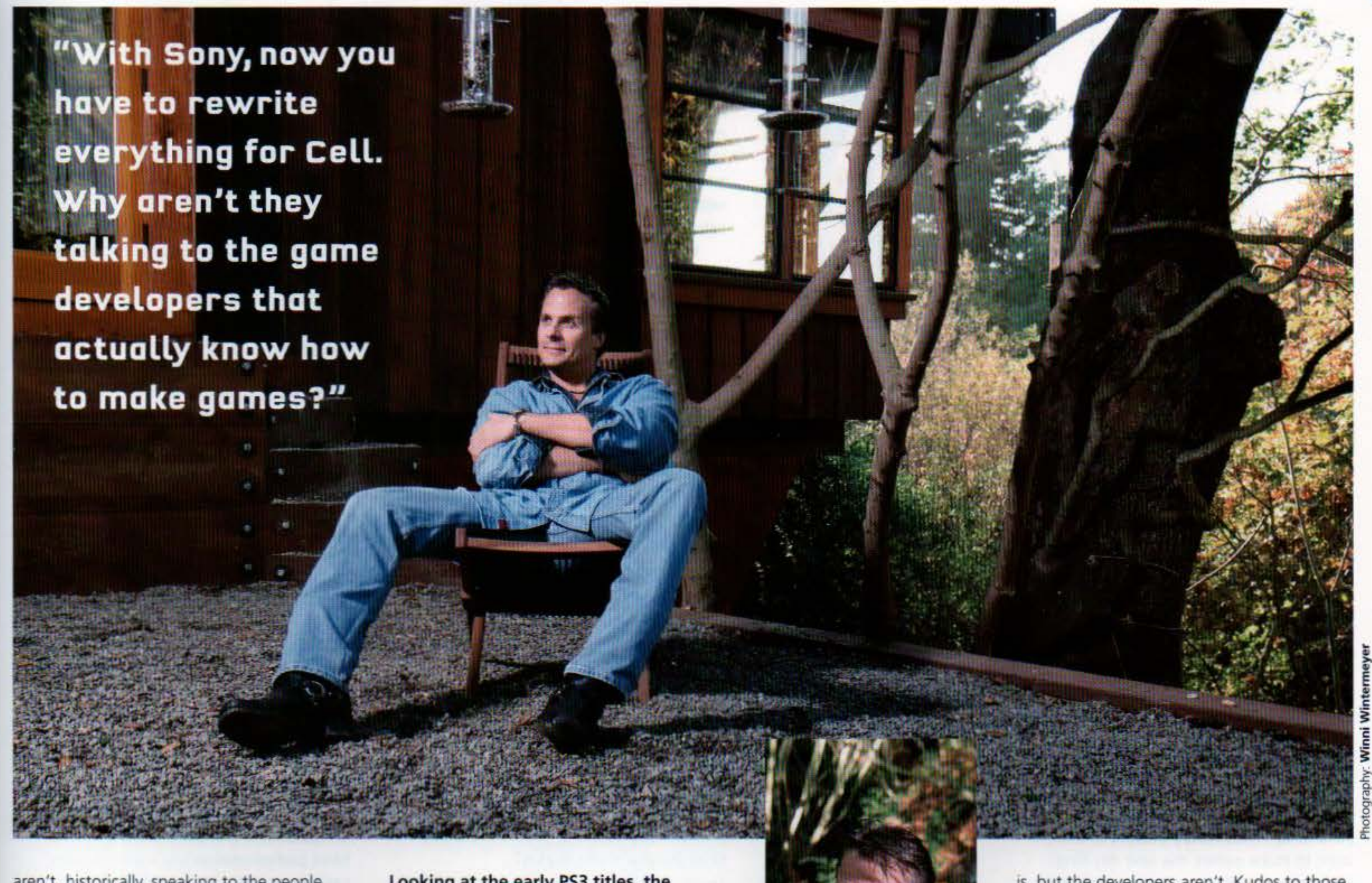
Who cares about it? I mean, really. Who cares? If you already have those games, you



already have the machine! It's a marketing thing. If I buy a new machine, I'm not putting my old games in there: I want to pla new games. But if games are to continue to be conducive to the development community, they're going to have to evolve off of existing tools, so those tools don't become valueless. And there's a huge investment that developers make in tools with each hardware generation, and then they have to create from scratch over again. It's crazy.

If computer graphics had gone that way, we'd be nowhere near where we are today. But the CG industry would have rejected the Ken Kutaragis: 'If you want to discard our software creations, we have no interest in your hardware'. In fact, many computer companies tried, saying: 'This is how you *should* be doing computer graphics', and the computer graphics community said: 'Piss off, you don't know what you're doing.' So the difference with the computer graphics industry is that it was focused on the product, and the hardware was dispensable – consumers weren't buying the hardware, but the product. The hardware manufacturers had to adhere to the needs of the filmmakers, the content creators.

The videogame industry is completely backwards that way. The engineering minds



Photography: **Winni Wintermeyer**

aren't, historically, speaking to the people who actually know how to build games. Show me a hardware design built by someone who knows how to build games – they're not there... except for Nintendo. I can see Miyamoto saying that software is most important, and to do the software right, we need to embrace the people who built their software for their GameCube, and can build off of it for the Wii. Because of that, they can hit the ground running, and are able to innovate. Whereas with Sony, now you have to rewrite everything for Cell. Why aren't they talking to the game developers that actually know how to make games? Saying: 'Y'know, if we could use our PS2 software to go into the PS3, we would be improving, and not just getting back to where we are now'. It's innovation prohibitive, and cost prohibitive.

And this is why the small developers realise they can't go on. When games get a budget of $15-20 million, the terms for the small developers evaporate quickly. When you have to do two million units to break even, something's really wrong – a singer who sells two million units is on the front of People magazine, while a game developer who sells two million units is being asked at a conference why his game didn't meet expectations.

Looking at the early PS3 titles, the quantity of work, and the standard of it, is exceptionally high, but there's a sense that the end result isn't necessarily that different for the player...

[Interrupts] And the cost to get it there was more! That's where it can't help but backfire. That doesn't mean gloom and doom, but the backfire is people like myself saying that we love games, but it's not moving to where we thought it would go fast enough, and the way it is moving, I don't want to be involved 100 per cent of my time. I want to be more of a progressive storyteller than be bound by the hardware limitations of what games are today.

The tricky part is – and this is where it backfires on creatives – with the press and gaming public, because the gaming public is largely fed the PR line: 'Aren't we all excited about this new hardware?' Maybe the public is, but the developers aren't. Kudos to those that have great sales success, but I look at it and wish that I was still playing games now, but they're just not captivating my interest. Not to be misconstrued, I have game concepts that I'm really excited about, but to spend three years of my life on something abandoned at retail when it was recognised as a unique and solid product... that's a game I don't want to play any more.

With the model of building Citizen Siege as a film and game project, are there economies of scale in terms of the production costs?

Well, digital assets – that's a synergy that means a lot for world builders. I think that with the hardware capacity of the game systems today, and the film resolutions for movies today, the two can be shared to a far greater degree than before. Take *Gears Of War* – we wouldn't mind seeing that quality in a television show, and yet all those digital assets are just being built for a game, when they exceed what's being developed for CG television.

On *Stranger's Wrath*, we found our realtime building tools were beginning to far exceed the efficiency of our pre-rendered tools, so we started using them instead. If we wanted a landscape populated with trees, and a river, say, the time it would take

to do that in Maya was a significant portion of the schedule. In realtime, we were generating them in just hours. And that's what realtime is bringing to CG: the tool power is changing the way we think about the creation of assets.

So when you step back and think about a movie that's going to be 100 per cent digital – how are you going to build a city? Are you just going to use the conventional Maya-like approach? Or how we're building them in games? The image quality is going to be the same on the screen. Our goal is that it looks like a $150 million movie, but we made it for under $50 million.

Is it right to say that Citizen Siege continues to deal with your concerns over corporate control and globalisation?

It's inspired by global conditions now. Beyond that, I don't want to get too much into it, as it would just open up speculation – it would be kinda like all the speculation when we closed the studio – 'Lorne Lanning quits games!' again, y'know? And how people say I'm confused because one day I want to make games, the next day films… I'd love the details to only start emerging when you're watching the trailer.

It seems, overall, the entertainment field is more receptive to counter-culture ideas than before – in openly scathing documentaries, for instance. Have you felt that shift?

I think when it comes to documentaries, that's true. In recent years, some have been escalating to places people had never imagined, like Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 – for the budget versus the returns, that was not a documentary's financial



model. But with mainstream movies, regular box office stuff, I think the audience is largely still the same: they just want great stories. And if a great story can come along and be an Apocalypse Now, where it has so much more insight into our world, where it shows us something with different eyes that wasn't the PR spin the governments of the world were trying to sell us, then it has that extra potency.

It's films and books that have shaped who we are – the films that blew my mind have inspired every aspect of my being. And real change is not coming through the bubblehead moronic stuff that's passed off

"Real change is not coming through the bubblehead moronic stuff that's passed off as news these days, it's coming through entertainment"

as news these days, it's coming through entertainment that has potency. And that includes games.

People rarely talk about the role of gaming within that transfer of ideas, and that they let you examine cause and effect and relationships in a way that you can't with linear entertainment. Why do you think that is?

That's what I think the potential is, but it's not going there yet, for the most part. I have no doubt that games are the most powerful medium we've ever had, but we're still in the tinker-toy stage. We just have to blow out to the point where a game can change the face of political opinion, like a movie does. Lord David Puttnam [keynote speaker at Gamecity, see p18] was firmly convinced that the civil rights movement in America was enabled to happen because it was filmed for television, and offered insight and compassion to the audience. It made issues relevant, and enabled people to see from a different perspective.

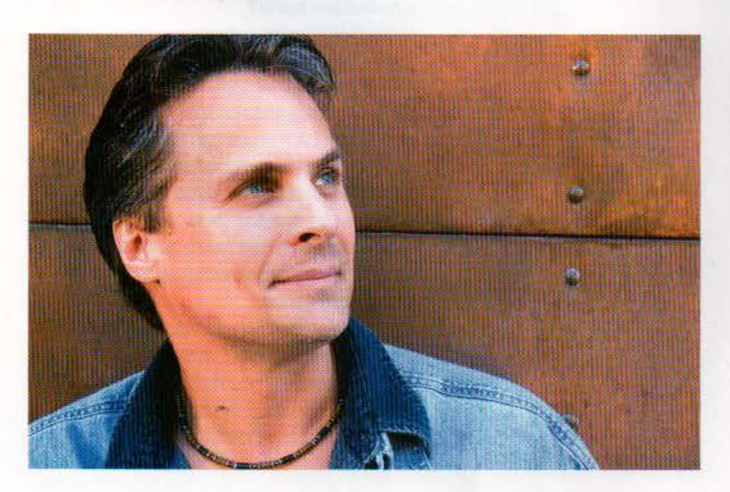
That's when a medium really has power – the idea of the artist, mythologically, is to show us the way, or the wrong way, even. it's showing the world something that it needs to know, but for some reason isn't necessarily able to see. You see it in a great movie, book or play, but it's not happening in games. What I see instead is we say: 'Hmm, why don't we take war, and make it as visually realistic as possible, then sterilise so that it's *just* fun', and there's something very perverted about that.

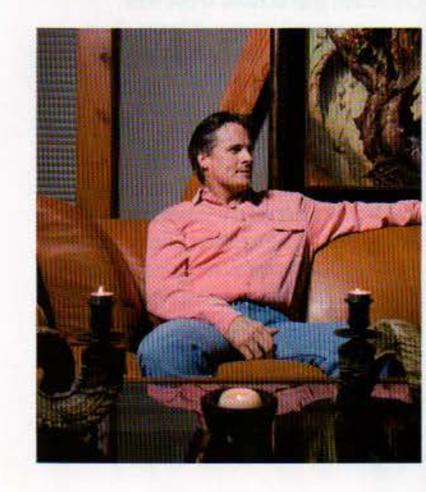
As a storyteller, how daunting are the increasing player expectations for more organic, procedural narrative structures?

I think you have to look at what's really interesting about a universe and its characters, and why that can translate into something interactive. *Cars* the videogame sells really well, but I have no interest in buying it – I don't even have an interest in looking at it, because I already know what it is. But when you hear about *World Of WarCraft*, you have a lot of curiosity about what's going on in that world. Now even if there were a *WOW* movie, the story is playing in that universe, but the individuals are creating content and personas, customising themselves within that world. I think that's far more the future. Customisation, community, teamwork, the factioning of beliefs: these should be finding their way into gaming tribalism. The more we translate the issues of the real world into interactive worlds that seem to empower people and belief systems, the more people we'll attract to them.

Isn't there a worry that more elaborate, persistent worlds might alienate people who already worry that games are too demanding a time-sink?

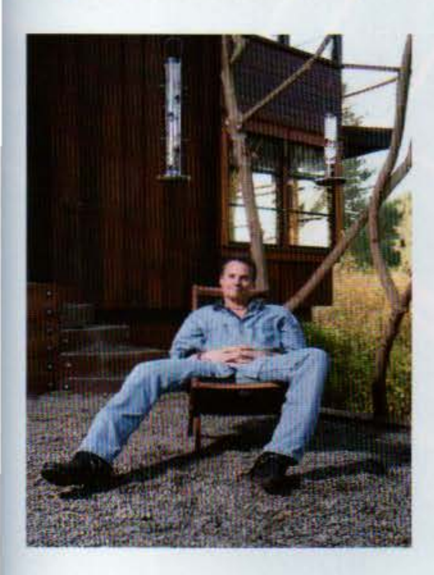
It's reasonable that people feel that way. Most professional people – even though I can't account for any true nine to five-ers with no other ambitions in life [laughs] – who come home each night, and feel that they didn't manage to achieve all of what they had wanted to do that day, especially if they've got kids – they just wish they had more time for that. And that's what needs to change – if a game can *enable* you to spend time with your kids, all of a sudden its paradigm has changed, and it has its value in your life. It's just as likely that people could be benefiting from a game experience, rather than just wasting their time, or being entertained for a few hours –





to be able walk out and say: 'I never knew that about this', or 'I never knew people could be so cruel and devious in that way', and not just because they crept up behind you and shot you in the back. The more those things are happening within games, the more relevant they become; the less they happen, the more they have the capacity to be significant timewasters.

But I do see the problem. I have never gotten into an MMO, because as soon as I feel the gravitational force of it, I pull away. I don't want to spend all my time there, and I know I can get caught up in it. I see the value and the attraction power and why

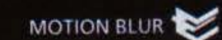


people love it so, but that's not how I want to spend my time. However, if there was an MMO kinda like *Second Life*, except it was all eco-sustainable, alternative architecture and energy, and I could walk around it and experiment with it all and be with other people who also want it – I'd be there in a second, because it would be attracting those people who are into it, from all over the world. But the people who shoot each other in *Quake* have no interest in connecting with one another. But it really does depend on the content. So even though I don't want to play *World Of WarCraft*, I do wanna see the movie, I wanna get a good story out of an orc, y'know, just not hang out with one all the time, since it's not offering me what I'm looking for.

Marc Ecko gave a talk at DICE a few years ago, and he said that we're all competing for people's leisure time. That's how we have to look at it. If games are going to keep being what game-makers want them to be, you're just going to lose gamers – I mean, how many have we lost to MySpace? Because now they can customise their persona and actually meet people, and exchange music and explore things that are relevant in their lives. And that's a huge competing factor for the future, as our leisure time gets less and less. That's the challenge games face.

"If games are going to keep being what game-makers want them to be, you're just going to lose gamers – I mean, how many gamers have we lost to MySpace?"

Motion blur



Animation development moves blindingly fast. But are performers about to put animators out of business?

Cinema took a leisurely century to move from the awkward scratchings of early animation through to accomplished 'performances' by digital actors such as Gollum or King Kong. Videogames have been forced to make that same transition in just 30 years. Moving into the new generation, motion capture leads the field as the high profile solution chosen by developers trying to get their creations up and running. Yet, despite its growing popularity, the wealth of expertise in traditional hand animation and the rise of new procedural animation techniques, the results we see on the screen often don't match up to the tools and talent that created them. If the stakes for animation are so high – and in gaming terms, a need for an emotional connection between the player and the characters on screen means that they could hardly be higher – where is all this technology actually taking us?

Motion capture may have come to



Wayne Rooney's mo-cap session (see the video on YouTube) shows him popping balloons, making a cup of tea and hitting a punchbag, but not stepping onto anyone's sensitive parts





Some motion capture sessions can be demanding physical, carrying a risk of both injury for the performer, and damage for the expensive equipment

videogames second hand, from the biomechanics industry, but **Mick Morris**, managing director of Oxford-based Audiomotion, is adamant that it's now found its spiritual home. Which, in his case, is the 6,000 square foot studio which supplied motion capture for games including *Miami Vice*, *Killzone*, and *Rogue Trooper*, as well as Hollywood films such as Poseidon. "When we first started in 1997, the cameras were very limited in resolution and could only capture at 30 frames per second," recalls Morris. "Now we have four-megapixel cameras shooting up to 1,000 frames per second. And the sheer number of them you can load onto a system? It's unlimited really – if you want to capture something the size of a football pitch, you can."

It's an alluring proposal, particularly as motion capture is significantly cheaper and quicker than most other forms of animation. The process is straightforward: a series of markers is attached to a performer, whose movements are then tracked and recorded to create instant animated digital models. Traditional keyframe animation, conversely, requires a lead animator to draw the key poses of any action, and then have the frames in between filled in, either by computer or other animators – and the result is obviously far more time consuming. "There's only a minority of studios now that still use keyframe animation," explains Morris. "It seems a bit silly to have these highly talented animators trying to replicate the human body when you can use our technology to capture every nuance in a fraction of the time."

But getting workable results is often a lot more complicated than pointing a camera and pressing record, and much of the motion-captured animation that currently makes it into games is jagged and glitchy. Morris sighs. "Quite often what happens, even if the developer's using motion capture, is that we'll be capturing stuff at 100 frames per second, but it gets baked down to maybe 30 frames per second. So they're taking really good stuff but because of memory restrictions it gets resampled down to something that looks absolutely horrible. And then when it comes to the whole blending process between the different moves, quite often the game engine hasn't been developed to be able to do that. We're hoping that next-gen engines are going to be much more efficient."

And although motion capture remains the quickest animation option, the time it takes can vary depending on what you're trying to shoot. "For hundreds of military moves it's fairly straightforward once everyone gets into the flow of it – you can literally get 200-250 in the can in a day," explains Morris. "What becomes different is if you're doing dialogue: there's much more direction involved, it's a much slower process." And then there's problems caused by the technology itself. "Part of the restrictions of mo-cap is simply the kit: the cameras cost a fortune. So without nets and improvised balls on strings, things can get smashed up. That calls a halt to a shoot pretty sharpish."

Relying on performances can also be problematic – with motion capture, you really are only as good as the motions you're capturing. "You can't cut corners when it comes to hiring talent. We've had people come in where the IT guy's done a bit of paintball on a Sunday and he's pretending to be Andy McNab out there for a day. It costs next to nothing. Conversely, when Andy McNab's been in the studio, he's been changing his clip and

"When Andy McNab's been in the studio it scares the hell out of you."

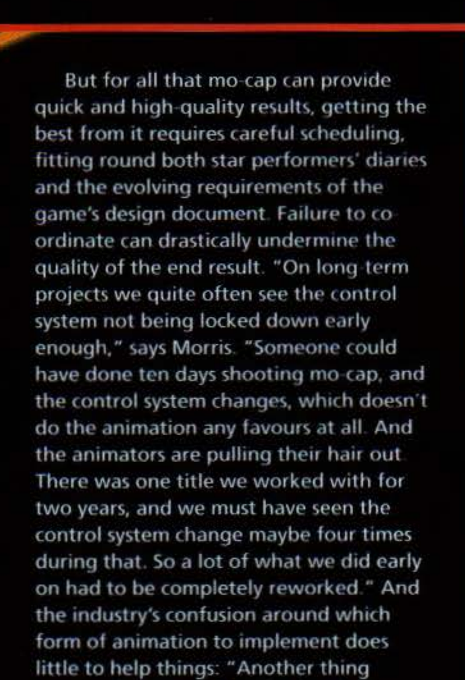
HOLLYWOOD BLEND

Whilst many would question the supposed snug fit that occurs when videogames and films come together, there's no doubt that motion capture technology offers a view of the two industries at their most closely related. Morris suggests that "games and films are drawing a lot on each other's talent, with your scriptwriters crossing over, and technical directors being coaxed over into essentially the same role. They know how to direct a mo-cap shoot; they know how to light it and render it. So there's a lot of competition for talent right now, and talent wants to work in games now because they see a fantastic future in it, while their own industry's gone a bit stale. There are only so many rendering techniques and lighting techniques. But moving into the interactive industry, they're seeing loads of possibilities."



(Left) Arsenal and England player Rachel Yankey MBE in full motion capture mode (Above) Mo-cap isn't just for human subjects, as Barney the horse proves

getting back in position within seconds – it scares the hell out of you." The solution, according to Morris, is to go for the best whenever possible. "Right across the board: the best martial artists, the best actors, the best footballers – Premiership, if you can get them." And there are promising signs that developers are starting to take notice: "We had Rooney in last Monday for EA, working with a football choreographer. When you see that guy in the suit, he's just unbelievable. Whatever angle he threw the ball in at, Rooney would catch it and drive it into the net. *Any* angle."



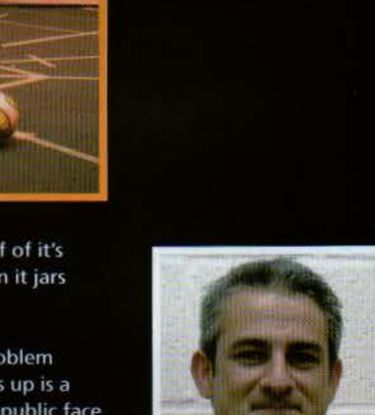
But for all that mo-cap can provide quick and high-quality results, getting the best from it requires careful scheduling, fitting round both star performers' diaries and the evolving requirements of the game's design document. Failure to co-ordinate can drastically undermine the quality of the end result. "On long-term projects we quite often see the control system not being locked down early enough," says Morris. "Someone could have done ten days shooting mo-cap, and the control system changes, which doesn't do the animation any favours at all. And the animators are pulling their hair out. There was one title we worked with for two years, and we must have seen the control system change maybe four times during that. So a lot of what we did early on had to be completely reworked." And the industry's confusion around which form of animation to implement does little to help things: "Another thing people do is start off with a load of keyframe animation because they've hired a load of animators. They then try mo-cap halfway through the project and decide it looks fantastic, and go back and redo all



the keyframe stuff again. If half of it's keyframe and half mo-cap, then it jars in quality."

Perhaps the biggest problem motion capture regularly shows up is a weak story. **Andy Serkis** – the public face of motion capture, if such a thing is possible, as the man behind poster boys Gollum and King Kong – has recently been called in to work on Ninja Theory's *Heavenly Sword*. When he started investigating videogames, Serkis was immediately struck that "there seemed to be no engagement between the player and the characters in most videogame stories. There were rather perfunctory bits of storytelling to Sellotape together gameplay, and I just thought that was a rather crazy approach. The new generation of games for me is about making the drama ultra compelling and believable and emotionally connective."

Working as performance director, Serkis's involvement with *Heavenly Sword* has gone far beyond acting, and takes in all aspects of the story and its direction. "I joined it at the stage where there was some fantastic conceptual artwork and a very strong story idea, and I got involved with the story and character design: to bring these characters together and give them a sense of reality and three dimensionality, as you would in a movie. For me, there was never any difference as



Mick Morris, MD of Audiomotion



Although motion capture is still most often associated with fight scenes and sports games, titles like *B-boy* show its potential for capturing more creative endeavours, creating games where movement is a satisfying spectacle in itself

EA's *FIFA 07* (left) relies on mo-cap, whereas the new Indiana Jones game (bottom right) uses procedural tech. The famous *Super Mario 64* opening screen (below) was the result of early motion capture experiments inside Nintendo





to how I'd approach directing actors in a movie or a play."

For the motion capturing itself, Serkis returned to WETA in New Zealand, and the same team he'd worked with on King Kong and Lord Of The Rings. "The way that we approached rehearsals leading up to the shoot, which again was treated like a film shoot, and the actual process of shooting was absolutely no different to the way we created Kong and Gollum," he enthuses. While analogies between videogames and films are always problematic, Serkis is emphatic that motion-capturing quality performances can only ever make games richer and more affecting. But that doesn't mean there aren't mountains to climb en route. "I think it's interesting that our casting director was going out to all the agents and she faced people not taking it quite seriously," says Serkis. It's a problem common not only to videogames, but motion capture projects in general. "It's been quite a long journey over the last five or six years since I did Gollum to educate people into what motion capture is all about: it's far from being CG killing the art of performance – it's actually the opposite. It enables the actor to play anything, to play all these extreme characters and give them humanity and reality."

Such problems aside, Serkis's experiences on *Heavenly Sword* have left him excited about the serious potential of games, and planning other videogame projects of his own. "I really do believe that in ten years' time, actors will come out of drama schools and will do theatre, film, telly and games. Games are going to be part of the repertoire."

Inevitably, however, like any ascendant technology, the success of motion capture creates some resentment as people feel left behind in such a swift-changing industry. Morris tells the story of an animator who, when hired to work on a motion capture project, grew gradually more and more depressed as the shoot went on. "And then came the outburst: 'Three years studying classical animation and I have to use mo-cap.' And he was genuinely upset. I thought: 'Mate, you're in the wrong business. You have to embrace it.'"

But just as motion capture seems to be really gaining mainstream recognition, there are suggestions from some quarters that the technology may be about to move on yet again, and this time it may be motion capture that gets left behind. Previously used to model particle effects such as water, fire or dust, recent developments have seen procedural animation turning its attention to the interaction of rigid bodies and character movement. Allowing for animation to be automatically generated in realtime, procedural approaches can lead to more surprising effects. In animation terms, it suggests a move away from pre-baked sequences keyed to certain button commands and towards active realtime simulations of movement.

SWORDPLAY



Heavenly Sword's creation has seen perhaps the most elaborate use of motion capturing by a videogame to date. Much of this is down to the enthusiasm with which the technology has been embraced by the development team, with Serkis as performance director. "With *Heavenly Sword*, we had five actors at a time, playing the scenes out on a stage together," enthuses Serkis. "And I think we achieved a world first too. We ran the whole game as a theatre piece, with eight actors all sitting around a three-by-five metre space, just entirely playing out the whole thing. Everybody jumped in and played different characters and fed off the energy of each other and we saw the story unfold before us in a very traditional and old-fashioned kind of story-round-the-campfire way. You saw what the rhythm was and the pace – you saw it all happening."



From the early rotoscoping experiments of games such as *Prince Of Persia* (inset) and *Flashback*, which involved TV screens with transparancies taped to them, a copy of Deluxe Paint and some very sore eyes, have come the natural leaps and bounds of *Assassin's Creed* (above) and games that make use of natural human movements

The loudest bell ringer for procedural animation is currently LucasArts, which has teamed up with Oxford's NaturalMotion to use its Euphoria engine, a biomechanical animation system which allows digital avatars to react realistically to their surroundings, entirely on the fly [see Codeshop, **E**165]. Currently in place on at least two upcoming titles, LucasArts is so excited at the potential of Euphoria that it was the focus of the recent *Indiana Jones* trailer, in which Euphoria-powered goons are punched around and fly into buildings and parked cars in a variety of highly individualised manners.

Whilst capable of eerily self-aware moments as NPCs steady themselves with a hand or sidestep punches only to flail against walls, procedural animation often lacks the guiding hand of either an actor or animator trying to convey a unified performance. Whilst there's no doubting its potential to create surprising fight sequences, the characters stagger about in a drunken manner which, while realistic, is not the kind of heightened, mediated realism we have come to expect from films and games. It's certainly a promising direction, and too early to pass judgement on, but at the moment too much procedural animation is modelling the wrong bits of reality as well as the right bits – separating them out remains the real challenge.

Procedural engines are also unlikely to provide a complete solution for all animation problems. Just as keyframe will still need to leap in when motion capture runs up against the limit of what is humanly possible, procedural animation will need motion-capturing to get a realistic basis on which to build its moves. "A lot of procedural animation systems are driven by motion capture," says Morris. "When we first saw the technology in about 2000 we thought: 'Bloody hell, this stuff's a bit of a threat,' but while working with it up to the present day, we realised the two actually go hand in hand." He also agrees that there are certain things that will never be possible procedurally – and not just elaborate stunts. "We're going to see an awful lot more – whether they're in-game cutscenes or not – of dialogue-driven performances. Voice actors: the hair on the back of your neck stands up when you hear these guys delivering lines. I'd challenge anybody to say that someday somebody's going to replace Andy Serkis, Tom Hanks, or Brian Cox when it comes to stagecraft crossing over into videogames."

"You get a really good actor out there, it's so close to a real movie"

Serkis himself suggests that, in the end, the choice of animation technique, whether keyframe, motion capture or procedural, "is just suiting the tools to the job. When you're looking at something photoreal like King Kong, you're wanting the verisimilitude, you're wanting the reality, those little actors' choices." Equally, keyframe or procedural animation should be ready to go whenever a different approach is required.

Audiomotion is willing to bet that motion capture will be around for the foreseeable future. Asked if they currently have the equipment on hand to cope with the new generation of consoles, Morris seems confident: "Absolutely, there's no doubt. We wouldn't expect to see a change in the hardware of the cameras for at least another five years, possibly longer. There's no limit to the height and width, there's multiple characters, faces and hands – I don't know what more you'd want, really."

That's not to say there aren't goals left to attain. "A time when these guys didn't need little reflective balls attached to their suits would be something we'd look forward to," he admits. "If there were no markers at all and you were able to track them, and track their faces without facial markers – there're some guys actually doing that at the minute – then that'd be another leap forward. But it won't be realistic for quite some time to come."

Having been in the industry for ten years, though, and watching keyframe animation marginalised, as motion capture slowly becomes better understood, Morris feels pretty satisfied to have gotten this far. "Where it's at right now is already the holy grail for us," he admits, pointing to the empty stage. "You get a really good voice actor out there, it's so close to a real movie performance so as not to matter. Obviously, if the performance is crap then it was all for nothing in the first place."



Although motion capture is associated with high profile, big budget games, even unlikely titles like the N-Gage's *Pathway To Glory* have taken advantage of its results





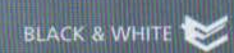
Andy Serkis (right and, in a way, above) started in the theatre before moving into TV, movies and games. He was ineligible for a 2003 Oscar nomination due to the CGI nature of Gollum

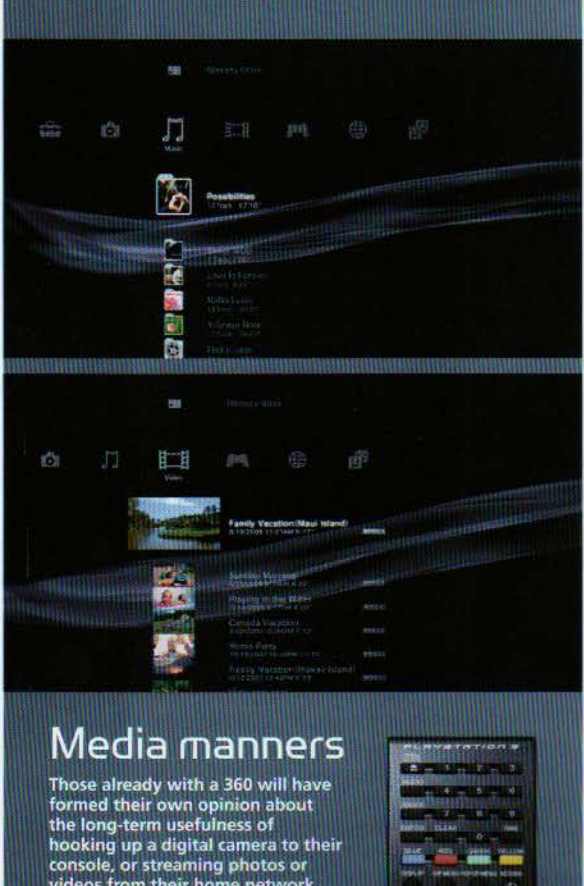
Black & White

For the first time in history, gamers are being offered a real choice. But just how do these radically different consoles feel in the flesh?

Two days and a million miles apart: there's never been a launch like it. On November 17, PS3 went on sale n the US. Wii arrived 48 hours later. Sit the two side by side under your television and the difference is almost comical. One black, weighty, expensive, the other bright, compact and cheap. Turn one on, and an ambiguous, orchestral thrum tunes into a neutral menu, gaming sitting unseen at the end of a spectrum of multimedia entertainment. Turn on the other and it delivers on Iwata's promise that play is never more than five seconds away. There have been console battles before, head-to-heads where tribal loyalties solidified around one set of specs and one line-up of games, but no matter how fiercely you held your position in Amiga vs ST or Mega Drive vs SNES, there has never been a contrast as profound as that between PS3 and Wii. From price to market positioning, external aesthetics to internal architecture, philosophy to physicality, these two machines have stretched the definition of gaming, annexing territory far beyond the middle-ground.

But, after years of speculation, both are now real propositions, and the frustrations of

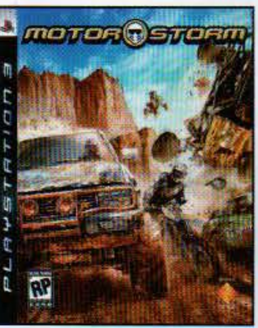


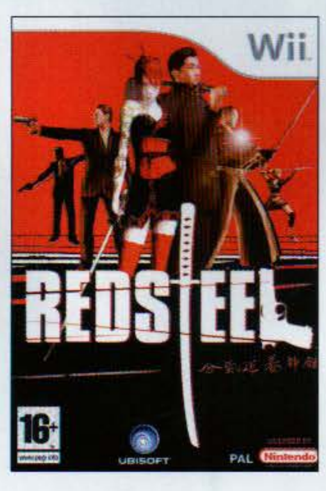


Media manners



Those already with a 360 will have formed their own opinion about the long-term usefulness of hooking up a digital camera to their console, or streaming photos or videos from their home network, but for much of the PS3's target market it's a new and appealing idea. PS3's image viewing application, which treats each photo as a physical object – fully rendered, lit and movable – is certainly a great deal more impressive than 360's functional approach. How well it will handle your digital music collection (360's usefulness is rather dependent on how organised you are with the ID-tags on your mp3s) is yet to be seen, as is definitive evidence of whether or not the console supports custom soundtracks. The optional remote makes the PS3's transition to home entertainment device complete, allowing non-gaming users to entirely bypass that side of its capabilities, its design far more in keeping with the output of Sony's home entertainment division.





Game boxes for both machines are objects of function rather than desire, regardless of their territory: the white Wii framing can sap more dynamic box art, and the PS3 insert's slightly squat format doesn't seem to add much to the overall appearance



Twilight Princess (reviewed on p68) is for many Wii's key launch title – a slightly odd status for a much delayed GameCube sequel. Regardless, it's hard to imagine many Nintendo fans going home without it, and it proves a successful demonstration of the controllers' capabilities

It's the console Hotblack Desiato would choose: practically frictionless, unexpectedly heavy and nerve-wracking to pick up with one hand

crowded shows, behind-closed-doors demos and press-release promises ends the moment you sit on your sofa, switch in your TV and take hold of the future of gaming. At every stage, the contrast is clear. The Wii controller gets lost in the clutter of remotes on your coffee table, making real its agenda of taking gaming out of the hands of gamers and into the hands of your household. The Sixaxis gets lost in the clutter of controllers, plainly displaying its lineage of more than a decade of mainstream gaming. The Wii intersperses knitted-cow races and rough-and-tumble boxing matches with cheery warnings and suggestions, illustrated with the naïve clarity of aeroplane safety instructions. The PS3 preludes your gaming session with an artful ribbon of colour and a restrained flash of that infamous Spider-Man font. And then you shuttle from executing Chimera to popping Mii-bubbles, from low-poly bowling to high-def swordplay. There's little that you see or do or feel with one machine you could imagine experiencing on the other.

One marvellous irony of the contrast is that, despite persistent worries about a bout of Wii Tennis requiring the reorganisation, if not emptying, of your living room, it's the PS3 that might cause the greater headaches. It's not so much its bulk – it exceeds the 360 only a little in each direction, and lacks the bothersome power brick – but that its shape and its style demand it takes centre stage. Whatever impression you've formed from photos, in the flesh PS3 is imposing: sleek and impossibly glossy (for the first few seconds, at least, before it sucks the dust from every corner of the room to form a dulling film) – it's truly the console Hotblack Desiato would choose: practically frictionless, unexpectedly heavy and frankly nerve-wracking to pick up with one hand. But squeezed alongside your TV, or slotted into a hi-fi rack, it loses a lot of its charm, even if its unobtrusive styling and near-silent running makes it a discreet addition to your setup.

By contrast, the Wii slots almost anywhere, and it soon becomes apparent that its physical demands are far less than was feared. The sensor bar is forgiving, sitting almost invisibly on top of the screen – its light weight and fine connecting wire may make you want to invest in some precautionary Blu-tak to prevent it wandering – and copes well whether players want to lounge, sit or stand, straight on or oblique to the screen. And while there's little to beat the satisfaction of full-body smashing an ace, Tennis proves perfectly playable while sprawled on the floor, with neat flicks and slices of the wrist all that's needed to win. Indeed, while a few hours of continual play (in flagrant contradiction of the jovial advice to take regular breaks, accompanied by a picture of a breezy open window) does take its toll, the symptoms are those of gentle muscle strain, not the sweaty, puffed-out exhaustion suggested by some of the more vigorous promo videos. It's a



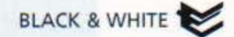
decidedly anaerobic activity, and the more familiar you become with the controller – a rapid process – the subtler your movements become. But as battles inevitably heat up, it likely won't be long before someone gets an inadvertent conk to the nose: the Daily Mail presumably has its howls of outrage ready.

But what of the contrast on screen? The starkest battle line is drawn between the Cell and the souped-up GameCube: legacy technology squaring off against extravagant future-proofing. And, as expected, the appearance of the two consoles is as markedly different on-screen as off. The PS3's games drown in detail, dense and smooth in motion. Wii games, so far at least, are full of functional geometric planes, jaggy edges and muddy textures. What's a little disconcerting is that the GameCube's ability to produce top-class graphics has been clearly established, from *Wind Waker* to *Resident Evil 4*, and yet – despite the familiar architecture – only *Twilight Princess* seems able to build on, or even match, those high-points. But how much does this discrepancy matter? What's quickly clear is that, in each case, the graphics serve the games' needs – as good graphics always should. *MotorStorm*'s highly-detailed vehicles and meticulously rendered cliffs aren't eye-candy: the game hinges on your ability to read at a glance every subtlety of the camber of the track, every smallest change in surface, and to see and understand the effect of both on the dynamics of your vehicle. Wii Target doesn't need HDR or parallax mapping; it needs clarity, immediacy and charm, all of which it has in spades. And yet, no matter how persuaded you are by Nintendo's new philosophy, there's no ducking the long-term implications of this gulf: PS3, already ascendant, has huge potential to stretch its visual lead, as Cell is tamed and 1080p filters into use. Wii, already dated, can only drop further behind, even if there's no bar on the artistic imagination which can be explored within its technical limitations. There is one point of similarity however: neither will make you hate your current TV. It's a sign of the gap between the machines that the test for PS3 is to see how much of the visual advantage survives when you plug it in to a SD CRT (answer: plenty) and how well the Wii stands up to being stretched out and scaled up onto an HD screen (answer: surprisingly well).

But, if it doesn't leave you wanting to trade in your telly, the discrepancy is likely to leave you wishing for the best of both possible worlds. Nintendo's claims that the Wii's architecture is designed to allow developers to focus on the controller rather than to allow the company to duck out of the costly graphical arms race do ring true, but the idea of a machine with the overall power of PS3 and the control flexibility of Wii exerts a strong appeal. Sony's line would be that the Sixaxis means that this machine already exists, but the reality is a little further from the truth. It's not just the case that



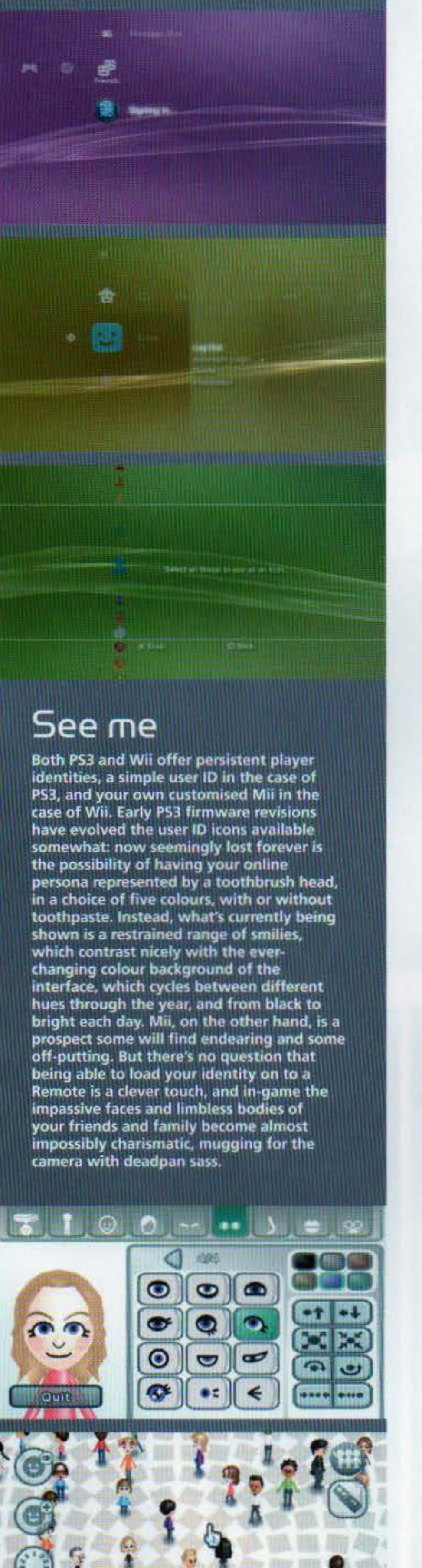
Although the Wii's stand holds the machine at a jaunty angle and provides clearance for the vent on the base of the console, it's not needed. Small feet on the main unit provide similar lift if you'd rather display the machine au naturel



the PS3 lacks Wii's positional capabilities, relying purely on tilt and movement detection, and the proof of that is that many of the Wii's more convincing launch games function almost entirely without position tracking. Far bigger issues are that the two-handed nature of the pad restricts natural movement to the kind of tilts and twists called for by a flight sim, and that the incidental inclusions of this capability (in *MotorStorm*'s tilt-steering mode, say) have thus far proved to be little more than frustrating novelties. Indeed, at launch, what the Sixaxis largely accomplishes is to prove out Nintendo's reasoning: for movement-based games to work, they have to be conceived from the ground up as such. It will take the arrival of games like *Lair* to demonstrate whether or not PS3 can claim a meaningful piece of motion-sensing territory for itself, and indeed if PS3 owners are even keen to spend a significant proportion of their gaming time using it.

What isn't in doubt is that the core PS3 game experiences will continue to depend on the pad's traditional form. Once you're over the shock of its lightness, it's easy to be a little underwhelmed by the fourth generation PlayStation pad. Pre-launch, attention is invariably held by the console itself, but post-purchase, your main point of contact with the machine is through its controller. For all physical extents and purposes, the Sixaxis is the PS3, and it's a little bit harder to enjoy the shock of the new when what's in your hands feels so similar to the old. Sony is certainly right to argue that the DualShock is effectively gaming's lingua franca, but that familiarity breeds not contempt, but perhaps a little sigh of over-recognition. Also familiar is the looseness of the sticks, which persists despite the marked improvement of the central dead zones. But there's no question that the light weight of the pad, the lack of resistance in the sticks and the removal of rumble leave developers with a real challenge in communicating a sense of physical connection to the game world. It may be the memory of rumble eases as the weeks go by – it's a transition many Wavebird users were happy to come to terms with – but initial reaction is that the loss is a substantial one.

And, unexpectedly, part of what makes that clear is the excellence of the Wii's vibration units. The Remote, as it sits snugly in your hand (and surprising many first-timers with its dinky size), is full of life. Its rumble is that same energetic little jolt that made *WarioWare Twisted!* such a tactile experience, and its in-game implementation – in Nintendo's games, at least – is very astute, providing feedback on actions and alerting players to possibilities. Coupled with the little speaker each unit houses, it personalises the play experience with surprisingly strong effect, from the little pling that helps identify each player in multiplayer games, to the eerie interjections from Link's new companion Midna (see our review of *Twilight Princess* on p68). The Nunchuck – again, even tinier than many expected – is also dreamily comfortable to hold, although the cabling which runs between the two, despite its generous length, is an unwelcome reminder of the bad old days of tethered controllers. Motion sensing on both bears up well to extended scrutiny, with the Remote's pointer capabilities in particular becoming an instinctive link between you and the screen: it's soon hard to remember how you did without it. There does, however, seem to be an issue with near-final units occasionally losing track of specific controllers, which is remedied by pressing the sync buttons which sit next to the SD card slot under the Wii's front flap and – annoyingly – inside the battery casing on the Remote (the PS3, incidentally, unlike Wii and 360 has no sync button on the console itself, but detects controllers reliably and automatically, sending a shut-down signal when switched off to save battery power). Less persuasive is the Classic Controller, whose weirdly positioned rear Z buttons seem equally awkward for large and small hands, and its only real advantage over a GameCube controller is its crisper D-pad.



See me

Both PS3 and Wii offer persistent player identities, a simple user ID in the case of PS3, and your own customised Mii in the case of Wii. Early PS3 firmware revisions have evolved the user ID icons available somewhat: now seemingly lost forever is the possibility of having your online persona represented by a toothbrush head, in a choice of five colours, with or without toothpaste. Instead, what's currently being shown is a restrained range of smilies, which contrast nicely with the ever-changing colour background of the interface, which cycles between different hues through the year, and from black to bright each day. Mii, on the other hand, is a prospect some will find endearing and some off-putting. But there's no question that being able to load your identity on to a Remote is a clever touch, and in-game the impassive faces and limbless bodies of your friends and family become almost impossibly charismatic, mugging for the camera with deadpan sass.

But it's at this point of contrast – the iconic Sixaxis and the iconoclastic Remote – that it starts to become apparent that these consoles have more in common than you might think. It's easy, after a year of hype, to forget how unlikely it would once have seemed that the successors to the GameCube and PS2 would both have hard-wired motion-sensing capabilities. Modern and robust implementations of old technologies which have failed before due to their poor performance and lack of support, they're an odd vision of the future of gaming. How central a role they'll play is hard to gauge on both systems. With Wii, while there's no disputing the sense of minor magic (not to mention a little fizz of endorphins) as you see yourself take physical control of the screen, it doesn't take long to realise that games you play sitting down are often going to be at an advantage. And so, as the touchscreen gradually took primacy over the DS's other technologies, it may be that the mouse-mimicking pointer of the Wii is what becomes the dominant use of the Remote. PS3 faces a different challenge, since the implementation of tilt control in games designed to be played with pads has a proven track record of being unsatisfying. But with the console certain to play host to the widest range of software, especially as smaller, more experimental download games arrive, it's hard to predict how integral the Sixaxis may become.

Those question marks over the consoles' futures are another thing they share: for both PS3 and Wii the sense of unfulfilled potential is immense. Again, for Wii, the DS precedent is clear. It took a year for the key DS titles – *Mario Kart, Animal Crossing, Nintendogs, Brain Training* – to filter through, and it's



Growth area

Although the Remote has grown a little since its Tokyo Game Show debut in 2005, it's still a slender device, likely to be dwarfed by the other remotes tucked down the side of your sofa. Wielding it energetically for long periods of time can tire out your arm (we predict Wii Elbow will become a recognised condition) but its excellent ergonomics mean that there's none of the tendon strain commonly felt from long sessions of pad-based play. The only unpleasantness in use is that (on pre-launch units, at least) the battery casing is ever so slightly loose, meaning that it moves under your hand as you gesticulate and can give a little millisecond of panic that the Remote is going to fly out of your grasp. The wrist strap will protect you from such worries, but – really – will you be using the wrist strap? The dazzling white Remote's other main capability is to make a 360 pad look decidedly grubby.



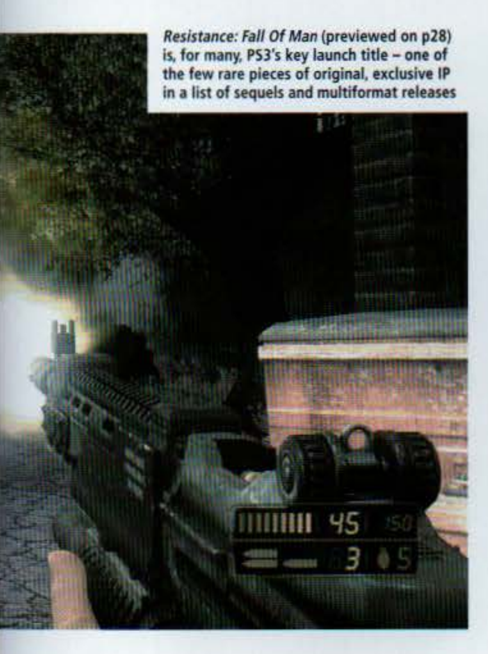


The Wii's pristine exterior hides a number of options. A front flap reveals the sync button and SD card slot, needed for storing downloaded content once the 512MB internal memory is full, and the top flap turns the machine into a GameCube, with controller and memory card ports



clear from the launch titles available that there's a similar lack of synergy. If you're a DS lover the Wii is yet to convert, then remember how bleak things looked for the handheld back in the days of *Ping Pals*, *Asphalt Urban GT* and *The Urbz*. Third parties – even Nintendo itself – are likely to take a similar amount of time to fine-tune their Wii game design: it's not possible to make this kind of paradigm shift without some pain. But while Wii faces that specific challenge, it's almost impossible to exhaust the range of PS3's potential. Sitting in your living room it radiates power. Indeed, the accusations of arrogance that currently clog Sony's airspace fit it rather well; its sealed, polished silence makes your TV feel out of date, your décor seem shabby. It belongs in the future, and is well placed to await its arrival.

There is simply no telling what the PS3 ecosystem will look like in five years – in part because some indications are based on whispered, NDA-ridden conversations, and in part because it's still evolving. Rather than present its console as a fait accompli, as Microsoft did, Sony has given the world a rather painful glimpse into the console's growth as motion sensing, community support and downloadable games have been integrated into its vision, one press release at a time. Cynics may accuse it of simply assimilating its rival's innovations – and certainly the timing of some announcements makes it hard not to join them – but those same cynics would be just as critical if Sony had failed to respond the new standards being set by Microsoft and Nintendo. But at every level, PS3 is ready to go the distance. Its specs make the machine expensive, but they mean that Sony has staked its claim to leadership at just the time when the horsepower race may be coming



Resistance: Fall Of Man (previewed on p28) is, for many, PS3's key launch title – one of the few rare pieces of original, exclusive IP in a list of sequels and multiformat releases

to an end. That 1080p resolution may have been a hard message to sell to the massmarket this year, but there's no danger of it looking foolhardy half a decade on. And the situation is similar with Blu-ray. Microsoft may be doing a good job of demonstrating that there's still room for more from the humble DVD, but Blu-ray's extra capacity is never going to be a bad thing for gamers, even if it may prove so for Sony's bank balance. And should it fail in its battle with HD-DVD, or indeed should both those technologies fail in the face of an entrenched DVD user-base and the oncoming rush of downloadable content, then it will have little impact on the PS3's credibility as a games platform.

And it's that downloadable content, of course, which may hold the key to the PS3's development. Sony has always been able to offer the widest range of software – from the cynically mainstream to the determinedly avant-garde – for its console, and the arrival of direct distribution and micropayments will only amplify that range. And although nothing is yet confirmed, it would be naïve to assume that PS3 won't soon be playing host to bought (or rented, or streamed) movies, music and TV, whether through Sony's infrastructure or a third party's. Sony's come one, come all approach to its machine (allowing full internet access, hosting a full distro of Yellow Dog Linux and exerting no Live Arcade style control over its downloaded games), means the wealth of potential content available through the console – from office software to streaming TV and subscription pornography, say – is almost limitless.

It's an intoxicating prospect, and one that comes at a high price. By freeing the potential of the



Kissing cousins

Another unheralded similarity between the two consoles is the fact each has a little portable brother. Seeing them together in the flesh makes perfect sense of Kutaragi's claims that PSP was always conceived as an extension of PS3, but beyond the announcement of the Remote Play function (which sends, wirelessly, the AV output of the PS3 to your PSP screen, allowing you to finish watching a movie in bed, say), there's not yet enough information to be certain how closely integrated the two devices will become. For Wii, DS offers the opportunity of offering yet more input possibilities (touchscreen and microphone) for its players, as the handheld can be used as a controller for the main console. Its also very likely that, in keeping with Iwata's pledge to give you a reason to tune into your Wii every day, there will be a steady stream of game demos and in-game freebies.





The size difference between 360 and PS3 is only slight, but is emphasised by the slimming inward curve of Microsoft's machine and the glossy belly of Sony's. The PS3's lack of an external power supply is unquestionably an improvement

console, Sony risks too closely mimicking capabilities that most homes already have through their PCs and laptops, and damaging the robust, stress-free experience consoles have always delivered. Nintendo faces almost the opposite challenge. Its Wii Channels, whilst offering full internet access via Opera, are clearly designed to reduce choice and increase usability, relying on the proven appeal of elements like weather forecasts, horoscopes and messaging rather than looking to usurp owners' existing relationships with the online world. It's yet to be seen if the Wii will have the advantage in this battle: its clear that the mouse-like capabilities of the Remote – alongside Nintendo's savvy collaborations with companies like Opera and handwriting recognition firm Zi, plus its quick start-up time – may make it a more appealing browsing option.

But that leads on to the last, telling similarity between these two devices: they're not quite ready. With just days to go to launch, both companies were unable, or unwilling, to provide full access to finished firmware and online environments. It's a stark contrast to the approach Microsoft – always evangelical about its expertise as a software and services company – took to 360. With that machine it was clear from the start how central the user environment was to the console's design – more central, it sometimes seems, than the physical components. The result has been a limited, but rock-solid service which has received consistent acclaim. In the process it's raised the bar to a daunting height for both Sony and Nintendo, who – despite their lack of expertise in the field – now have to offer systems which reach the same level of stability and navigability, but exceed it in terms of range.

It's a tall order, but what Wii and PS3 have on their side is time. With Wii's distinct identity, and PS3's bottomless potential, both leave the 360 feeling like the last of the old breed. Despite Live and Arcade, the Ring of Light and Achievement points, the 360 now looks more like the pinnacle of a process of console evolution, finishing a line drawn from PlayStation to Dreamcast to Xbox. And, despite the stark contrast between the two new consoles, this is the key they share. PS3 and Wii are simply too disruptive to belong to that lineage: there is no map for where Nintendo and Sony are about to take you.

The 360 now looks more like the pinnacle of a process of console evolution, finishing a line drawn from PlayStation to Dreamcast to Xbox



PlayStation generation

Its testament to how revolutionary the first PlayStation controller – or to how conservative Sony's approach is to design – that the Sixaxis's form has barely evolved from the PlayStation's original pad. That continuity is in stark contrast to the fracture from the first console's design – neutral and restrained – to the boy's toy visual identity defined by PS2, and continued by the PStwo and now PS3. There's no question the design of both will play well in PlayStation's established market, but those who were put off by the looks and function of PS2 (there's nothing like sitting down with a non-gamer to remind yourself how specialised a DualShock is as a device) are likely to remain alienated. But since that established market is the largest and most diverse of all modern console audiences, Sony likely isn't too worried.



The more you look, the more points of similarity you see: Wii and PS3 both use a line of to display your player number, although PS3 can support up to seven players, indicated by doubling up its lights. It's easy to forget the bad old days of needing a PlayStation multi-tap



Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Lumines Live



It's a testament to the power of Achievements: take a rather lacklustre port of a game, add the thirst for 20 meaningless points, and kiss hours and hours goodbye.
360, MICROSOFT

Mario Kart DS



Racing virtual Italians is something familiar to all Mario Kart DS players, but nothing beats racing the real thing thanks to the WFC service. Especially when you win.
DS, NINTENDO

Okami



Ameratsu's journey provides hours and hours of canine devotion, his tail's magic paintbrush managing to teach a few new tricks to the PS2's dogged old DualShock.
PS2, CAPCOM

You don't have time...

To read this page



You don't have time to read this caption, either, not if you want to get the most from *Final Fantasy XII* – or the other dozen excellent games out between now and Christmas

Really, you don't. So let's not waste precious minutes tutting over the arrival of the year-end glut, even though two hardware launches mean it's bigger than ever. Or questioning the absurd circular reasoning through which the industry thinks it should sell all its best games in November, because that's when people buy the most games, because that's when the industry puts its best games on sale. Or calculating on the back of envelope just how much of your monthly salary (all of it, basically) you'd need to invest to enjoy the best that gaming currently has to offer.

Instead, let's be practical: what's the best way through this maze of credit card bills, 4am finishes and impossible choices? Step one: choose your Christmas game. Everyone deserves one pure indulgence; that one game that provides a total escape as the windows thicken with frost and the family bickers over leftovers. For those with the cash for a Wii, that may be *Zelda*. If not, *Final Fantasy XII*, *Vice City Stories* or *Project 8* may provide your bolthole, and the reviews on the following pages should help you choose which.

Next step: placate the others. There's no surer way to banish the spectre of Scrabble than by taking the initiative. *Guitar Hero II* is what you need here, assuming *Wii Sports* isn't already part of your literal action plan.

Step three: don't be greedy. Even if you can, clearing out the local game store's shelves just means nothing will get the attention it deserves. Restraint is key: all the better to gorge yourself to the full.

And that defines step four: schedule. Even if the list to the right makes you blanch, don't forget that come June next year you'll be facing a demoralising drought. So make yourself a note: *Neverwinter Nights 2* or *Gears Of War* may not seem quite such a shiny prospect in six months' time, but they'll still deliver as satisfying an experience. Don't fall prey to that odd gamer tick which means something that's consumed you with excitement for the best part of two years feels suddenly stale after it's sat in the shop for anything more than a week.

And that should do it: another Christmas survived. Why, it's almost enough to make you glad Sega ruined Sonic again: at least that's one game off your list.



Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS

FORMAT: Wii (VERSION TESTED) GC PRICE: £40 RELEASE: DECEMBER 8
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E164, E169

Many familiar elements return in a *Zelda* that feels, more than any before it, like a grand family reunion. Most old acquaintances feature a fresh twist, even if this enemy still requires little more than a perfectly placed arrow

A persistent theme in fairytales is that wish fulfilment can be a curse rather than a blessing. The same holds true for gaming, where early perfection so often leads to diminishing returns for a series, as developers are left with little more to do than quietly repeat a proven formula, shuffling that same handful of magic cards and laying them down in a slightly different order.

But for *Zelda*, a true gaming fairytale if ever there was one, repetition is not a danger, but a prerequisite. The joy of each new title comes in spotting the imaginative reconfiguring of old ideas, and familiarity breeds not contempt, but a sense of history and ritual most games would kill to possess. Just as Link is caught in a Mobius strip of events, always accepting his destiny and then gradually learning to fulfil it, the dungeons, items, characters and locations are endlessly reworked, retuned and then redeployed. Recent entries in the series have shown signs of more ambitious experimentation, first structurally with *Majora's Mask*, and then aesthetically with *The Wind Waker*. *Twilight Princess* makes it immediately clear that this period of tinkering is over with for the time being, and what emerges is the most traditional *Zelda* game so far; one that seeks to celebrate the series rather than take it anywhere new.



The shift towards the more adult Link has allowed *Twilight Princess* to take a more grown up tone. This is almost certainly the most violent *Zelda* yet



Twilight Princess is convincing proof that Nintendo's new controllers are capable of delivering elaborate three-course feasts of adventuring

Judged purely as a release title for the Wii, it's a mixed success – but not for the reasons you might be expecting. Put aside all your fears of aching limbs and repetitive strain injury – *Twilight Princess* is convincing proof that Nintendo's new controllers are just as capable of delivering elaborate three-course feasts of adventuring as they are of knocking up the fast food





The wolf sections are perfectly integrated into the main game, despite failing to live up to their fullest potential. Never a chore, transforming from human to animal is handled quickly and cleanly, and brings variety to both exploration and combat





Twilight Princess's boss encounters share a preoccupation with size and scale. However, the classic mixture of experimentation and aggression perfected from earlier series instalments will win out in most circumstances







The return to Hyrule Field is initially a muted affair. Only a few hours later, galloping along on Epona, does a sense of shared history return; this time a longish wish-list, including horse-based combat, has been filled out





Sword fighting using the Remote and Nunchuk is easy to pick up, even if certain moves are tricky to master. Frantic shaking – the Wii's take on button mashing – will see you through early encounters, but don't get too relaxed: enemies you meet later on in the game require timing and precision





While lacking the completeness of *Wind Waker*'s visual approach, *Twilight Princess* still offers up its fair share of enigmatic, haunting images. Loneliness, separation, and alienation are key themes to its story

of minigames and novelty racers. With movement controlled by the analogue stick, the Remote is used mainly for targeting ranged weapons and – given a brisk shake – sword fighting. Most of the time, the Remote doesn't even have to be pointed at the screen, and within minutes you're no longer aware that you're doing anything new or different.

Yet in terms of launching the Wii, that's the crux of the problem: the sheer power of the *Zelda* series to draw you in and command your attention means that, while combat has a definite physical thrill, it's hard to pay that much attention to any new experiences the controller might be delivering. The skill with which the control scheme has been implemented renders the Wii's innovations almost invisible.

Graphically, *Twilight Princess* is an equally unsuccessful means for gauging the new console's potential: this remains a GameCube title, both at heart and on screen. While the rose-coloured evening light of Hyrule Field offers prolonged moments of fierce prettiness, there are also muddy, confused textures and blocky scenery. This return to a more traditional graphical style actually makes the game look like it predates *The Wind Waker*, lacking the uniting clarity and colour of the older title.

But if *Zelda* has already tamed the Wii both in terms of controls and visuals, it also provides it with a simply spellbinding game. Following on from an audaciously low-key opening, what unfolds is a quest as massive and generous as it is thoughtful and carefully constructed. The story is told largely in the minor key, with beautifully suggestive cut-scenes moving from regret, self-reproach and delusion through to cautious optimism as Link battles to save Hyrule from the invading Twilight Realm.

A jarring electro-futuristic world that creates the game's most vivid imagery, Twilight Hyrule is a place of scorched golds and blacks, a shivering, pixellated wasteland where humans have become ghosts, Link has transformed into a wolf, and the horizon is filled with horrible, distorted monsters



The Hyrule of *Twilight Princess* will be a familiar place to fans of earlier games. Hyrule Castle remains the focus

who chatter in low electronica and scream in bursts of feedback.

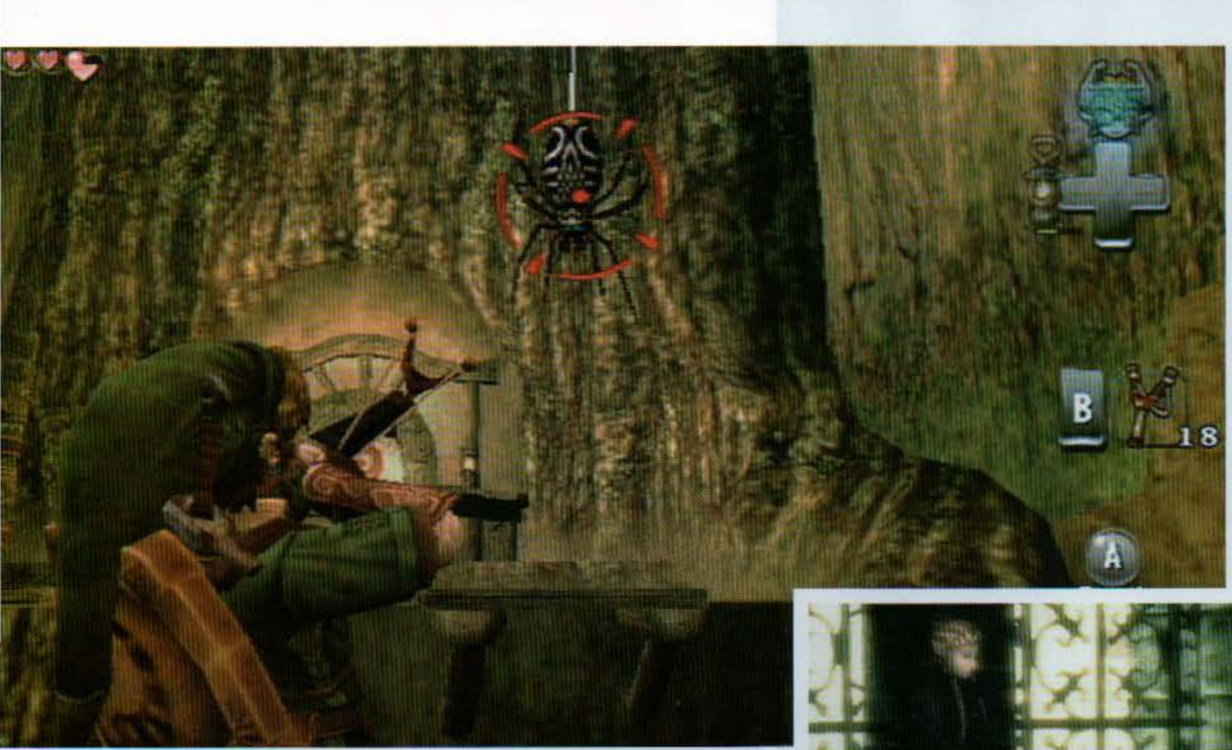
While travelling between the Twilight Realm and Hyrule itself, both as a human and as a wolf, may suggest a return to the heady, mind-burning puzzles of *A Link To The Past* or *Ocarina Of Time*, in truth the implied complexity never really emerges. As a wolf, Link can use his animal senses to follow scent trails and see ghosts that would otherwise be invisible, yet the use of the device is reined in, providing a handful of genuinely extraordinary moments but nothing to rival the interlocked worlds of the previous titles. *A Link To The Past*

CONTINUED >

Pole rider



Piquing the public's curiosity ever since the first screenshots emerged, Midna is *Twilight Princess*'s most successful addition. Enigmatic, often cruel, always fascinating, her garbled voice and the giggle she emits through the Wii Remote provide the game with its deepest lasting impressions. A chubby nymph, naked save for a strange stone crown, Midna's role in the unfolding plot goes far deeper than simply providing Link with hints on how to tackle the challenges of the Twilight Realm. Her stylised body and large, cartoon eyes also provide a lone connection with the cel-shading of *The Wind Waker*.





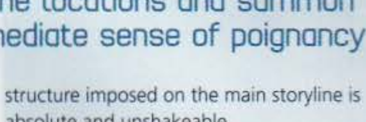


Malevolent and untrustworthy, Midna remains an enticing enigma almost through to the game's climax. While she is often simply a means of accessing prompts or warp points, her skewed design makes her linger in the memory

remains the only game that truly asks its players to think hyperspacially, and *Ocarina* is still the series highlight in terms of utilising the mechanics of cause and effect. Instead, *Twilight Princess* emerges as a much more controlled experience than previous *Zeldas*. There's still the usual generous tangle of side quests and distractions, of course, but the



Few games have the ability to take you back to the same locations and summon up such an immediate sense of poignancy



structure imposed on the main storyline is absolute and unshakeable.

In a sense, it's those earlier games in the series rather than the Twilight Realm that provides the real parallel worlds for this latest outing. Set in a Hyrule that is geographically very similar to both *Ocarina Of Time* and *A Link To The Past*, part of *Twilight Princess*'s depth comes from revisiting old locations, and seeing exactly how they have changed this time around. *Ocarina* may have hinged on the idea, but it's this game that truly feels like joyous time-travel as you return to Kakariko Village to find it transformed into a wild frontier town, or swim through Lake Hylia after the best part of a decade's absence to discover it frothing with new life. Few games have the ability or inclination to take you back to the very same locations as past adventures and summon up such an immediate sense of recognition and poignancy: it requires a delicate balance in terms of cherishing past mythology while feeling free to tweak it as necessary. What's truly astounding is that it's not overtly played upon here, it's left to work purely within the player's own mind.

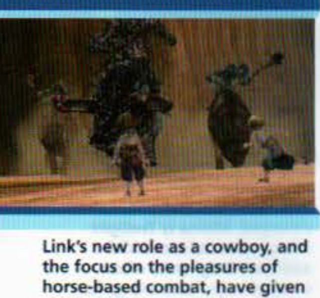
And there really is a lot here to dislodge old memories, as *Twilight Princess* clearly sees omission as a greater sin than repetition. Almost every gameplay element present will be familiar to *Zelda* veterans, and this title goes further than most in revisiting, remixing, and often simply replaying past glories. Giving no spoilers away, *Twilight Princess* features the return of many old pleasures, and its dungeons recreate at least one former nightmare in some detail.

Not many titles could bear up under this level of recycling, and on occasion *Twilight Princess* can seem overly familiar and vaguely incestuous – even by *Zelda*'s standards. If the game has faults, it's that its aggressively generous stance on providing content has led to some familiar padding, and that the developers have listened perhaps too closely to the desires of the fans, giving them exactly what they've



Although character design is generally strong, Moblins have lost most of their scene-stealing power. While the loose limbs and hanging jaws remain, a less cartoonish depiction has removed much of their degenerate charm

Wagons roll



Link's new role as a cowboy, and the focus on the pleasures of horse-based combat, have given the game a western-tinged influence that it's proved eager to capitalise on. Hyrule's villages have quite naturally embraced the iconography of dusty frontier outposts and Kakariko's graveyard, where Dampe once paced between headstones, has become a Boothill Cemetery that Wyatt Earp could be proud of. Elsewhere, there are wagon trains for Link to protect, and even a tense, stealth-based take on the shootout at the OK Corral.







Twilight portals – warp points to help alleviate mindless travel back and forth– are scattered throughout Hyrule. An older, bigger Epona returns to provide another, thunderous method of transport









always wanted – which is inevitably more of the same as they've had before.

These are far less worrying faults than audiences often have to put up with, though, and *Twilight Princess* still plays like a rich and fantastical dream. With the main quest clocking in at around 40 hours, this is also the largest *Zelda* yet, and it has memorable moments of its own to be cannibalised in future instalments. Standout sequences include a vertiginous scramble across the rooftops of Hyrule Castle, a manic wagon train escort mission and a charming visit to a mysterious frozen mansion. Special items and boss battles are a particular strength, and its character design is a huge improvement for the series. The faces of villagers, frequently bland in the previous titles, are memorable, telling and often sad; children are particularly well captured: over-awed, embarrassed and bolshy. But it's Midna, Link's companion and guide, who really stands out. Vaguely malevolent and gently untrustworthy, she's a snarling, conflicted addition to the *Zelda* family, and feels like an instant classic.

There are changes present alongside the improvements, too, albeit in the addition of new features rather than anything deeply structural. Horseback combat is as thrilling and haphazard as it should be, and while the introduction of more intense elements, such as finishing moves, will never truly feel at one with the other games in the series, *Twilight Princess* is at pains to establish itself as an older, darker brand of whimsy.

What's lacking is a clear sense of purpose. *Ocarina Of Time* was tasked with bringing the series into 3D, and in doing so laid out a mechanic that future games would be foolish to ignore. Controller aside, with nothing pertinent in need of innovation, *Twilight Princess* has instead set out to become the definitive title in the series, a one-game encyclopedia of everything that makes *Zelda* unique. With a fervour that borders on the taxonomical, it gathers all of the series' characters and locations together in a structure that not only reconfirms but celebrates its elaborate conventions. In succeeding, it's entirely understandable that the results not only display most of the strengths of previous games, but also provide pitch-perfect case studies of their occasional flaws. With the focus on elaboration rather than evolution, *Twilight Princess* triggers more memories than it creates, yet it's still an effortless classic that towers over the gaming landscape. Ignore it at your own cost. **[9]**



Zelda's worlds are as varied as fans of the series have come to expect. The familiar emphasis on exploration will still lead to hidden gems and memorable discoveries



GEARS OF WAR

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: NOVEMBER 17
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: EPIC
PREVIOUSLY IN: E156, E164







The hulking one-man-army is a well-used sci-fi convention, but it's never been realised with this level of gritty chunkiness before, testament to Unreal Engine 3's rendering muscle

One thing you learn from *Gears Of War* is how few questions it can actually answer. Is Xbox 360 as capable as PlayStation 3? Is it a better home for the ubiquitous Unreal Engine? Is MGS a more astute publisher than SCE? Is Epic a better gunsmith than Insomniac? We're really no closer to finding out. The battle lines drawn between *Gears* and *Resistance: Fall Of Man* (see page 28) are so circumstantial, the two games so surprisingly idiosyncratic, that comparisons teach us next to nothing. Of Epic itself, however, and specifically wunderkind designer Cliff Bleszinski, it says much.

Nevertheless, the frame of reference used to create the battle between the human soldiers of COG and the subterranean Locust horde is rather cramped. It may show smart appreciation of the gaming potential of pop-culture's most recent icons – inspiration from the likes of Starship Troopers, The Matrix, *Resident Evil* and Saving Private Ryan mean there must be a fair few Amazon Listmania! entries that inadvertently map the entire *Gears* genome – but the result is rather demoralising. When all that's seen of the surviving human race is two hulks of weaponised muscle named Marcus Fenix and Dominic Santiago, their grunting squadmates, and a rabble of militarised hobos, you have to ask yourself which regime the world would be better off serving.



Gears Of War is home to the best muzzle-flash, explosions, twilight and camera work this generation has yet to offer



Although not as simple as the press of a button to execute (the chainsaw bayonet needs to be revved-up shortly beforehand). Should an enemy get too close, this is more often than not the only outcome, leaving the saw user vulnerable to attack while stuck in the animation



There's a distinct lack of large enemies in *Gears Of War*, despite what may have been shown in trailers. In a standard boss protocol, bullets effectively do nothing until the enemy's weak spot is shown, resulting in an anticlimactic battle often easier than the constant barrage of the main game's levels





But if the aesthetic is downbeat, its implementation is anything but. *Gears Of War* is one of the select few modern games that you play to watch, home to the best muzzle-flash, rainstorm, explosions, twilight and camera work this generation has yet to offer. Even beyond the panic-cam, the roadie-run, and whatever other showpieces Epic has chosen to hyphenate, it does a sensational job of dropping you headfirst into the proverbial crud.

And it's because of that drop that *Gears Of War* requires you to play the game on its own terms, by Epic's own rules. Fail to do so and you'd be forgiven in not recouping all that's on offer beneath its dry, war-torn skin. But the better you play, the better it looks, and the more real and disturbing it becomes. Nestling somewhere between *Advanced Warfighter* and *Halo*, the action is tense and unrelenting, creating panic in situations where focus is your best defence. Bleszinski likes to call it a horizontal platform game, but in practice it's more like a gory version of chess, as your men bound in squared-off patterns from one piece of cover to the next.

But this tactical elegance is let down all too often by close combat, which proves an awkward, somewhat clunky business, invariably resulting – in multiplayer particularly – in execution by chainsaw bayonet: the victor of such a collision is simply whoever can unleash his blade first. It's strange that, for a game so heavily set in favour of the 'duck and cover' school of shooting, one of its most talked about features is a static melee attack. After all, play the game by Epic's own rules of stopping and popping from a distance, and you may never see it first-hand.

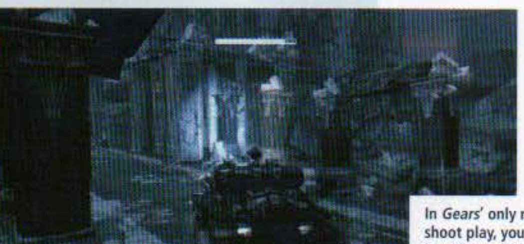
The rest of the game's sights, however, will be exhausted soon enough. While eight hours-worth of 'Hardcore' singleplayer campaign may not actually be too short, it is certainly hampered by an uninspiring story arc that dwindles three acts in, culminating in a strikingly anticlimactic finale. With little







The 'roadie-run' (named after the crouched dash of roadies surreptitiously moving stage equipment at gigs) intensifies the action in all the right ways. With its less responsive turning circle and over the shoulder 'panic cam' it perfectly conveys a feeling of urgency in the player and is stunning to look at



In *Gears'* only real moment of diversity from cover-and-shoot play, you find yourself attempting to escape the bat-like Kryll on wheels. This limited section breaks the repetition while transporting you to pastures new and is significantly more enjoyable in co-op, with one player operating the torch-like weapon and the other driving.





Pressing and holding Y will immediately divert the camera to points of interest throughout the game, be it parts of the story unfolding before you or minor hints for completing the task at hand – such as a weak column or a control panel

reason to journey back to Seras to play again, other than to collect the COG tags of fallen soldiers to boost achievements, it's hard not to wonder whether the price of creating all this 'destroyed beauty' was insufficient data space.

Which isn't to suggest that the game represents poor value: multiplayer adds wealth to *Gears* and although bare at first glance in terms of modes and options – with its horizontal playing field and near one-hit kills – it offers similar play to the likes of *Rainbow Six 3*, forcing a strong emphasis on cover and team play. The ability to re-animate fallen comrades on the battlefield allows fights to ebb and flow, creating more elaborate conflicts than the steady attrition of many deathmatches. But there's little subtlety to be found in the over-familiar weapon-set, and the relatively small number of maps means that its potential may be quickly exhausted by the hordes that arrive come Emergence Day.

Gears Of War exists for two very simple, very sound reasons. One, as a showcase for the potential of Unreal Engine 3 and two, to demonstrate the power of 360 one year in. And it amply achieves them both: Microsoft will be more than happy to have this running on demo pods next to PS3's *Resistance*, just as Epic has been happy to have it centre-stage at every Microsoft-sponsored event for the past 18 months. But for all the excellence on show, there's no shaking the sense that this is a game that does everything that was asked of it, but nothing more. **[8]**



In keeping with all things *Gears Of War*, the act of throwing grenades is made all the more enjoyable to watch thanks to the swinging animation and helpful trajectory arc for aiming. Alternatively, allow yourself to get close enough to an enemy and tag them with a grenade (frag or smoke) to rack up multiplayer points

Got your back

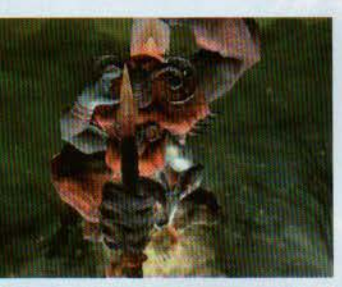


By far the most enjoyable way to experience *Gears* is in co-operative mode. Available over Xbox Live or locally, co-op charges you and a friend with controlling Marcus and buddy Dom through the complete story arc of the game. What makes it superior to singleplayer, however, is in the way the levels' paths unfold. Beautifully crafted for dual play, often causing the two COGs to be separated, able to just about see the other struggling in battle, but unable to directly aid. A greater emphasis on strategy becomes apparent as players are able to work together, flanking enemies and reviving teammates with no feeling of the game being weighted in favour of Marcus – a character now devoid of his lead.



FINAL FANTASY XII

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£26)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), Q1 2007 (UK) PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E132, E138, E159





The chain bonus system, loosely related to a similar mechanic in the online *Final Fantasy XI*, grants better loot and even HP top-ups the more enemies from the same family you kill in a row, turning the uphill XP grind into a thrilling downhill snowball if you can find a good spot

Who knows how much it really cost Yasumi Matsuno – the original director of this troubled RPG epic, five years in the making – to make *Final Fantasy XII*? His health, some say; others his sanity; others his job. We may never find out. Who knows how close the finished product is to his original vision? Maybe only he does. But if his vision was to restore *Final Fantasy* to greatness and revolutionise the Japanese role-playing game with a radical yet seamless blend of every species of RPG – action, tactical, MMO, traditional – then it has been fully realised.

Once *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* were brought together under the same roof it was inevitable that they would be led down different paths, but few would have predicted how different. *Dragon Quest VIII* was an immaculate, craftsmanlike restoration job, reverently and dutifully following the order of service of the classic JRPG. *Final Fantasy XII* preserves the spirit and a thousand hand-me-down details, but scraps the central tenets of the faith. Random battles – gone, in favour of a world that's crawling with visible, marvellous monsters, and an MMO language of aggro and threat. (Although surprise random attacks do occur, they're a dramatic feature, not the tedious norm.) Turns – gone, in favour of real-time action, free movement, programmable party tactics, arcing neon spider webs showing action and intention: the formal line-dance replaced with a gorgeous, controlled riot of semi-automatic murder. And in place of the illusion of choice common to so many games of the genre is a real freedom to shape your party dynamics, character specialisation and play style as you see fit, a creative streak imported from the best strategy-RPGs.



Presentation is exquisite throughout, and the interface is superb: attractive, economical, powerful and unintrusive. Tiny, thoughtful blessings like the universal pause button and exclams that alert you to nearby interactive objects abound, and it's backed up by informative sound effects

It's a dazzling revision for the series, and still a surprising one six months after the Japanese release. What's also surprising for a franchise known for its bombastic storytelling and hormonal angst is that its return after five years should be so comparatively sober and low-key. It's immense, of course, and certainly spectacular, and yes, Vaan, the supposed lead, is a fey, orphaned 17-year-old with a brother to avenge. But that storyline is quickly discarded as Vaan becomes an accidental tourist in a tale of political intrigue and shifting loyalties concerning the occupation of the kingdom of Dalmasca by the (not necessarily evil) Archadian Empire. *Final Fantasy* games (the revered *VII* in particular) tend to hang on their plots, but *XII's*, acted out in muted voices and formal language, is more peripheral. It works best as part of the incredibly rich tapestry of background colour in the world of Ivalice, in tandem with the stunning production design

So it's not what happens next in the story but the addictive pull of the action and the substantial meat of the game itself that will propel you through *Final Fantasy XII*. For that, we can thank Gambits and the Licence Board. Gambits are the system of rules you can use to determine your party's behaviour, arranged in order of priority and broken simply into target (e.g. ally below 50 per cen



Final Fantasy XII preserves the spirit and a thousand hand-me-down details, but scraps the central tenets of the faith. Random battles? Gone

The land of Ivalice is thronged with beautiful and exotic beings – NPCs, party members and monsters alike. Both the male and the female characters are explicity (although not crassly) sexualised in their outlandish fashions, and you'll never see better haircuts in a PS2 game

















The basic party of three is chosen from a roster of six: you'll tend to maintain direct control over the party leader and let Gambits rule the other two. A fourth, uncontrollable guest character is often added for a welcome power boost, but be warned – they can be liabilities, so learn their behaviour quickly

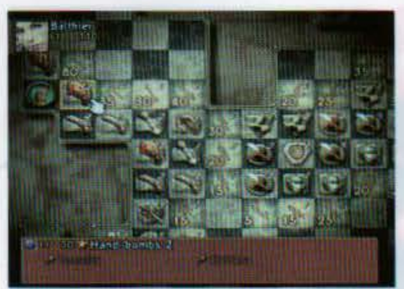


A genuinely interesting, useful and entertaining log book, the Clan Primer tracks hunts, offers tips and compiles bestiary info. The Sky Pirates' Den rewards achievements with old-school sprite renditions of the main characters

health) and action (e.g. use potion). Tinkering with Gambit strategies to create the most effective grinding machine, or to respond to the predominant enemy types in an area, is absorbing and satisfying, although a couple of simple rules are enough to ease the workload considerably and radically change the rhythm of the RPG. The staccato micro-management of old has morphed into a much more organic, free-flowing style of play. Gambits allow you to have your cake and eat it: to wield a party as a single entity around its leader and feel physically closer to the action, in the style of a western, single-character or online RPG, but also to survey and refine your strategies in the abstract, from the top down. They are a masterstroke of game design and ought to have a sizeable impact on the entire genre. The only mistake may be to force you to buy new conditions and to dole them out gradually, meaning many actions (especially curatives) have to be performed manually for a long time before they can be worked into your gameplan.

The Licence Board is a sprawling skill-tree, covering spells, technicks (secondary spells with no MP cost), armour and weapon proficiencies, and a selection of tasty character Augments (essentially permanent buffs), bought with Licence Points accrued for each kill. It's initially almost identical for each character, with specialisation artfully encouraged by the hunt for one-off squares that unlock the mighty Mist powers – Quickening spells and Summons. Intimidating at first, it's actually a brilliant visualisation that makes moulding your characters a game in itself, and gives you near-total freedom to do it how you like. However, it is laborious to have to buy both the skill and the right to use it, and some may feel the Mist powers at the end of the rainbow are underwhelming, but like the MMOs that inspire it, *FFXII* is about teamwork, not brute force.

It seems almost unfair to boil a vast game with so many intricacies and expensively mounted distractions down to a couple of its menus. But that's just it: *Final Fantasy XII* is, against the odds, a triumph of hard game design. Its elegant, eloquent systems speak far louder than its script, and the story you write in Gambits and on the Licence Board and then watch unfold in its wonder-stuffed world is the more compelling by far. The fact that it's reasonably difficult – seldom challenging, but never mindless – is a mark of *Final Fantasy*'s newfound self-respect, and it will involve you more, without making you work as hard for it. Beautiful, engrossing and impeccably polished, *FFXII* is also a work of progressive genius that hauls its staid genre up by the bootstraps and takes its place alongside the *WOW*s and *Oblivion*s of this world. It's altogether too good to be true. **[9]**



Gradually revealing the hidden treasures of the Licence Board is a reliable and stress-free thrill, since access remains available to all the standard skills and stat boosts, however slapdash your initial choice of route

Tally ho!



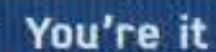
***Final Fantasy XII*'s primary side-quests are its hunts. These are essentially optional boss fights, dotted around the game world and triggered by reading a bill in a tavern or, in the case of the tough 'elite marks', accepted straight from Montblanc, the moogle head of the hunting clan. Naturally you're well rewarded for a kill, and if you're a few levels down or low on cash and equipment, a hunt (including the fighting you do on your way to it) is a pleasingly focused alternative to simply grinding monsters for loot and experience. In addition, completists will want to track down the 80 named rare monsters in the game – usually standard enemies with boosted stats – but the only known reward for that is a satisfyingly full Clan Primer.**



Wii SPORTS

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: BUNDLED WITH CONSOLE
RELEASE: DECEMBER 8 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E164

You're it





It's hard to imagine that *Wii Sports* will often be played alone – it's a game that draws an audience even when it doesn't pull in participants. That said, there will be those who want to ensure their multiplayer victories are crushing, or who want to spend some time exploring the subtleties of the Remote. For them, the game includes a series of training areas and challenge modes for each sport where the precision of the motion detection can be put to the test and unbeatable strategies (our cross-court backhand is already the stuff of legend) can be devised.

Wii Sports may well be the best launch title ever made, but that doesn't necessarily make it the best game ever made. Nintendo, facing the task of communicating a genuinely ground-breaking piece of hardware, needed a piece of software which would take the task of explaining it out of the hands of its copywriters and into the hands of its players. *Wii Sports* – approachable, entertaining, transparent in function and responsive in play – is everything it was asked to be.

Tennis is joined by golf, bowling, boxing and baseball, each of which plays its part in sketching out Wii's potential – and its potential pitfalls. It's easy to see why tennis has been pushed to the forefront : controlled purely through the Remote, it requires next to no instruction – assuming you're happy to take on trust the fact that you have no control over your avatar's movement. A similar sim-lite approach is taken to racquet dynamics: strokes are responsive enough to give a real sense of connection, but fudged enough to make sure that rallies are fiercely fought, rather than disintegrating into missed shots and fluked aces. Bowling, which neatly lifts *Super Monkey Ball*'s likeable approach to the game, demonstrates what's perhaps a more likely pattern for Wii games, by using a combination of movement and button presses. Cycling between position and angle choice is triggered by a D-pad press, but spin and velocity are tracked as you mime delivering the ball – the height of release determined by releasing the B button. But that motion means the game needs to be played standing which, illuminatingly, dents its long-term appeal.

But that's offered in the form of golf, a deceptively simple version of the game which solves many long-standing presentational issues (communicating green contours and swing strength) alongside delivering seductively sensitive swing detection: precise enough to be rewarding, forgiving enough to avoid frustration. It too, of course, means you have to abandon the sofa, but the slower pace and more fulfilling gameplay makes it a more sustainable prospect.

What baseball makes clear is that even though the novelty of motion sensing can lift almost any game, it can't carry one alone. Although winding up your swing gives the best chance to explore just how sensitively the bat can track your movements, both batting and pitching soon boil down to little more than exercises in timing, and exhaust your enthusiasm as well as your arm. The clumsy, rambunctious boxing – using both Remote and Nunchuck, one for each hand – is as certain to reduce a room to laughter as it is to prove that even Nintendo is going to produce some proper stinkers as it masters its own machine.

So, perfect? No. Indispensable? Yes. *Wii Sports* more than earns its bundled place as an essential component of the hardware. **[7]**



There's no predicting, it seems, when your Mii will be legless and when it won't. Batters lose their legs when they field; bowlers (top) seem to gain them. Somehow it doesn't seem to really matter, such is the charisma of their presentation

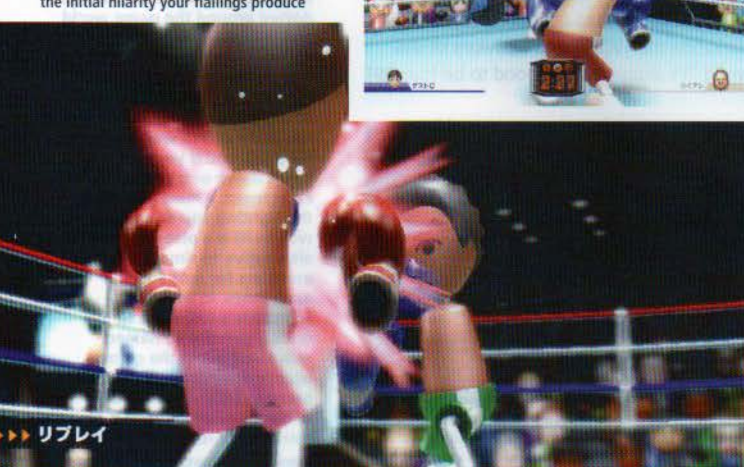


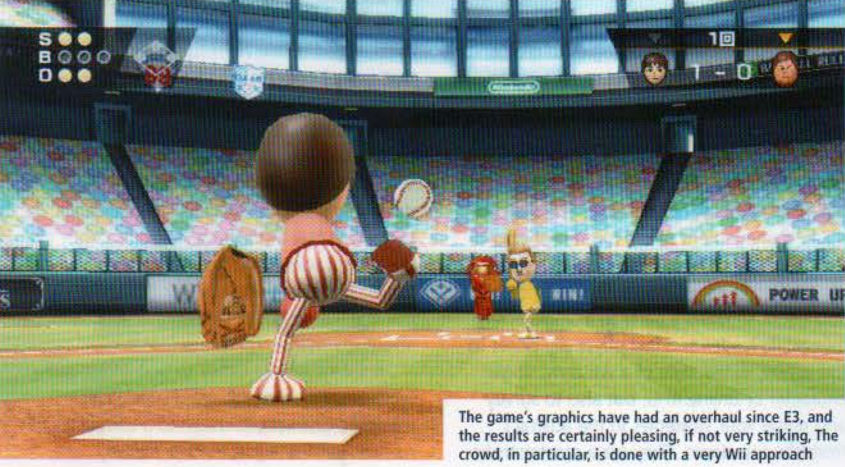


In twoplayer tennis, swinging early controls the player at the net, late the player at the baseline. It provides a second chance and mimics the speedy pace of doubles



Boxing is in some respects the most ambitious of the sports, requiring both Nunchuk and Remote, and detecting headshots and body blows, blocks and jabs. In practice, it's a flustered free-for-all, each round lasting far longer than the initial hilarity your flailings produce



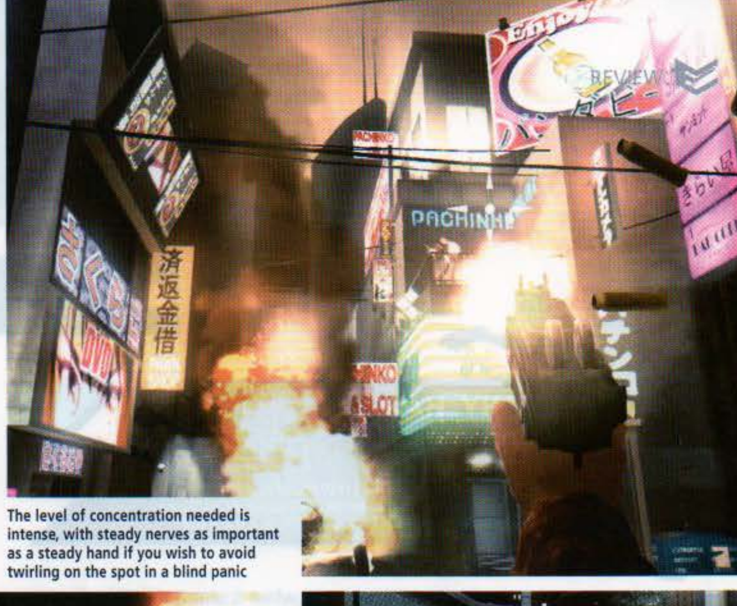


The game's graphics have had an overhaul since E3, and the results are certainly pleasing, if not very striking. The crowd, in particular, is done with a very Wii approach



RED STEEL

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £40 RELEASE: DECEMBER 8
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



The level of concentration needed is intense, with steady nerves as important as a steady hand if you wish to avoid twirling on the spot in a blind panic

Red Steel is intended as a Wii spoon of sugar for all those gamers worried that Nintendo's new console would offer nothing but cross-generational family fun. Ubisoft has spent a tidy sum crossbreeding this resolutely old-school shooter with a new-wave control system, but that hard work hasn't been especially successful. Despite Nintendo's ethos of accessible games, *Red Steel* has actually made the FPS more complicated than ever, requiring a plethora of contorted hand flicks and button combinations to be learned if you're to rescue your kidnapped fiance from evil Yakuza boss Tokai.

Several gestures are awkward to perform; to activate your gun's zoom, you hold A and push the controller into the screen. Though it sounds intuitive, pulling back zooms you out, so you aim while holding the controller at an extremity. It frequently leaves you falling off the edge of your seat, and not because you're enthralled by the plotting. Despite three different sensitivity settings, the on-screen aiming cursor feels skittish, and the lock-on is little help, training the camera rather than the cursor on enemies, made worse by the fact that enemies can hit you with pinpoint accuracy from any distance. Ultimately, it forces you to adopt a restrictive *Time Crisis*-esque duck and cover strategy.

It's ironic given the game's working title of *Katana*, but guns are the weapons of choice here: apart from a hilt-bashing stun move, sword use is restricted to the infrequent one-one-one boss battles. These make the best use of the Remote's motion-sensing functionality, as you wait for your opponent to reveal an opening in his attack before you joyfully flail your arm in the air to slash him bloodlessly. You can also earn respect points by breaking his sword and humiliating him. These sequences pepper the first six hours of the game as you embark on a less-than-magical mystery tour of bland warehouses, garages and factories. Things pick up substantially when the action shifts from LA to Japan, as the previous linearity gives way to more interesting locations (see 'Saw winner') and a hub level that lets you tackle subsequent missions in the order of your choosing.

It's easy to over-rate launch titles thanks to the shock of the new, doubly so when the control scheme is as interesting as this one, but at heart *Red Steel* is just another lever-pulling trawl through big rooms and S-shaped corridors. The cheesy dialogue, flawed aiming mechanic, erratic music and occasionally frustrating restart points mean that while Ubisoft's PG-rated tale of ninja gaijin targets the J-cool of Kill Bill, it barely hits straight-to-video Steven Seagal. **[5]**



Your health bar recharges like *Halo*'s shield. Incongruous as that might be, the hits you take thanks to the wobbly aiming mean the game would be unplayable without it



Multiplayer is diverting, but there's a paucity of gameplay options. Entertainingly, players receive secret ears-only missions via the Remote microphone at the start of a match



The focus attack apes *Red Dead Revolver's* by letting you pause the action while you nominate targets, which are then instantly dispatched when time resumes its flow



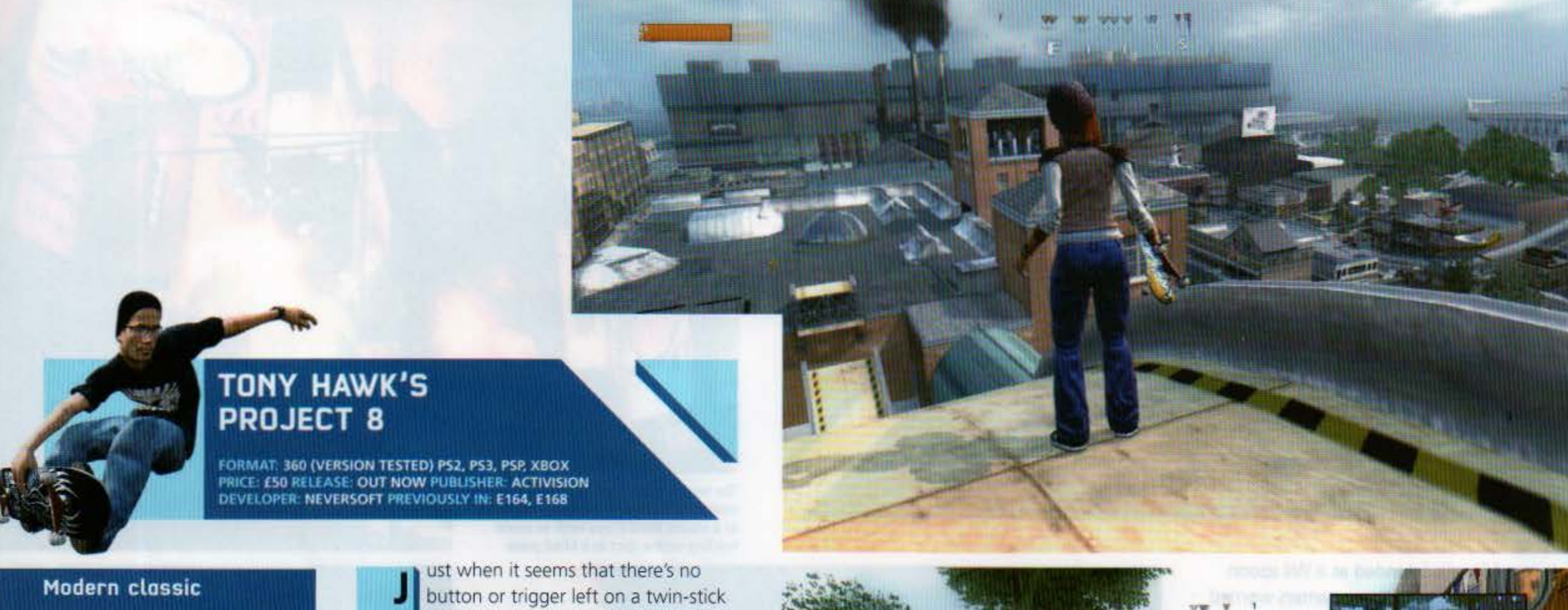


Opening doors, pushing levers and reloading your weapon are all achieved by a shake of the Nunchuck controller, something that simply results in a weary wrist rather than a great sense of immersion in the game

Saw winner



Once you reach Japan, you must convince rival bosses to join with you against Tokai. You can tackle the bosses in any order, but we recommend Tetsuo, the gaming boss. After fighting through a pachinko parlour, you earn the right to take part in his twisted game, waking up in a winter wonderland film-set populated by exploding ski bunnies, sword-wielding Power Rangers and murderous yakuza transvestites. Tetsuo mocks you through speakers implanted in creepy giant rabbits, urging you deeper into his nightmare. It's as close to a videogame adaptation of the movie Saw as we're ever likely to get, and it's a relief to see the developers finally throwing off the shackles of boring municipal buildings and cut loose with the level design.



TONY HAWK'S PROJECT 8

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED) PS2, PS3, PSP, XBOX
PRICE: £50 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: NEVERSOFT PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E168

Modern classic



That Classic Mode returns isn't much of a shock, but it's one of many pieces of trad *THPS* design that's been seamlessly positioned within *Project 8*'s structure. Activated by talking to certain NPCs, Classic Mode sees squares of the gameworld sectioned off, and a two-minute run started in order to complete any of the ten generic goals on offer. So far, so familiarly cosy – until *Project 8*'s cascade of difficulty settings gets involved. Completing five or eight goals, not necessarily in the same run, earns you an Am or Pro rating respectively. Sick, however, asks for all ten in a single run, which is a criminally filthy gauntlet to throw down, a seemingly impossible task that seems all too possible during the hours you'll spend tackling it.

Just when it seems that there's no button or trigger left on a twin-stick joypad for the *Tony Hawk* series to conscript to its combo-crafting cause, Neversoft unearths yet *another* sweet spot. *Project 8*'s Nail The Trick feature – click down both sticks to slow the world, and zoom both camera and control in on feet and skateboard, the place where everything actually happens – adds not just another score-swelling possibility to the game's broad catalogue of trick and trick-linking skills, but a much-needed touch of raw cool and polished flash to a franchise that has had a troubled identity in recent years.

Every *Tony Hawk* game since *Pro Skater 4* brought with it a jumbled sack of ideas, whose least successful additions felt like Neversoft was trying to build a pyramid on top of another pyramid; *Project 8*, however, feels like a ground-up refinement from the series' perennially solid base, as if a Katamari had been taken to all of the previous games and gathered only those things sticky enough to matter into one place – the genuinely free-roaming districts that make up its city. It's where everything happens, from challenges to Classic Mode, online score battles and multiple difficulty levels, all integrated into one space. Spot Challenges offer a chance to test basic manual and grind skills, among others. Marked out with garish graffiti tags, they're seamless to attempt, and epitomise the compulsion created by placing all three difficulties – Am, Pro or Sick – into a goal, leaving you to decide how far you wish to push yourself, which is likely much further than you'd have done in previous games. Some Sick goals are delightful torture for veterans, utterly unobtainable until you suddenly complete them.

Project 8 is a confident and unified reappraisal of the series' refined ideas, and implemented without breaking the cyclic grind of the annual franchise. But there is a cost, in that for the extra licks of detail and solidity, the formerly near-unbreakable framerate – the silver lining for some basic-looking environments – is prone to a lot of creaking, off-putting enough to spoil it all for those who treasure such slickness above all else. Otherwise, it's both a puff of fresh air and a sigh of relief for those who've stuck by the series, who've perpetually kept their restless fingers crossed for the next *Tony Hawk* game to provide as big an advance in trick control and possibilities as *THPS3*, a revitalisation of the very spirit that made the franchise a success. Finally, it's time to stop asking where next for the series, and to start savouring where *Project 8* has taken it. **[8]**



Instead of money, *Project 8* offers 'Stokens', the game's shopping currency that's earned by impressing NPCs with tricks, or simply barging into them. A picture-in-picture cam follows any peds that have been knocked over, as they'll now travel a fair distance to exact an overexcited revenge



There's now an option to deliberately bail, and aftertouch is provided to swell the hospital bill and broken bone count. Side-challenges offer an excuse for such abuse



While daft secret skaters and silly character customisation persist – no bad thing – the series' novelty elements are gone. Nail The Trick is the centre of the new content, intricate trick sequences becoming a kind of soft-focus porn







TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX VEGAS

FORMAT: 360, PC PRICE: £50 RELEASE: NOVEMBER 24
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: UBISOFT MONTREAL
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E168



Stealth elements work far less well than the out-and-out military gun battles. None is particularly challenging, seemingly adding very little to the overall dynamic beyond attempting to strike a balance between scenarios





Thermal imaging comes in handy but hampers play: while in this mode, there's no way to tell whether or not you've been hit by enemies

Rainbow Six has always pitched its stake as the most accessible of the Clancy family, merging the least challenging aspects of its close *Ghost Recon* and *Splinter Cell* relatives with an overriding mass-market appeal. *Rainbow Six Vegas* now continues this trend, wrapping tactical FPS conventions in unfamiliar clothing, hoping to hook those floating players who can't decide if getting to grips with painstakingly tactical play is worth their valuable leisure time. In this, at least, it convincingly succeeds – there's something for every red-blooded 15- to 45-year-old action movie-loving male here. Weaknesses in scenario, pacing and objectives hinder the experience, but overall it's as vacuous and fun a ride as its real-life setting.

Plot and play-wise, it's familiar stuff: terrorists are causing trouble in the free world and it's up to Team Rainbow to put it right. Using a variety of weapons, you tactically place your troops around each location to suppress enemy fire. Sure, you're a two-dimensional cut-out of a character (the suavely named Logan Keller), but you can't imagine the game's development team getting too fussy about the finer details of characterisation – it's Las Vegas that's the game's central star.

Sin City itself starts life as a shabby facsimile of the real thing: the meandering imaginings of Hollywood focus groups (it's ironic that Ubisoft has managed to secure product placements for Axe deodorant but not actual Las Vegas hotels). A few levels in, though, and the city blooms, its grandiose



Casinos present the opportunity to drill a magazine full of bullets into slot machines and roulette wheels as well as enemy foot soldiers. Watching the slots frazzle out while spitting out a fortune worth of quarters is pure entertainment

casinos playing every neon-saturated slot machine and bar for all they're worth. Replacing the cover of warehouse crates and barrels (there are plenty of those, too) with gaudy one-arm bandits and swanky craps tables works well, providing a varied yet easily negotiable environment in which to fight.

But although the game's Vegas is seductively glamorous, other factors don't always measure up to the high standards of the setting. Reflective surfaces shimmer but don't actually reflect anything, and in-game elements like posters and

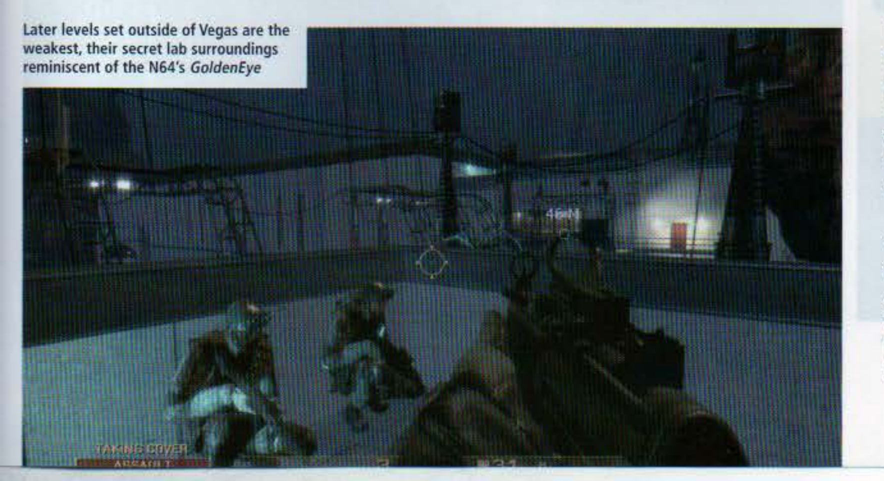


pictures are horribly pixellated, while the flat-textured skyline looks comically out of date. AI is also underwhelming, with enemy decision-making rarely exhibiting much subtlety. Nor is there much variation to distract you, with only two types of objective – bomb defusal and hostage saving, each alternating on almost every other level.

If it weren't for the fact that Las Vegas itself is a refreshing antidote to the usual point-and-shoot backdrop, these things might impact upon your enjoyment just a little bit more. But even with that compensation, it's very difficult to shake off the feeling that this is simply *Rainbow Six* HD rather than *Rainbow Six* next-gen.

For Clancy veterans, it's easy to forget that's what stale to them is fresh to others, and there's no doubt *Vegas* is a good all-round introduction to the tactical FPS. Glitzy and attractive, but ultimately a little empty, there's also no doubt it lives up to its name. **[6]**

Later levels set outside of Vegas are the weakest, their secret lab surroundings reminiscent of the N64's *GoldenEye*



Extra extraction



The Clancy series is well known for its multiple game modes, but here *Vegas* comes up a bit short. Terrorist Hunt mode pits you in a quick deathmatch with 20 CPU enemies – not an enticing prospect for those who have tired of the singleplayer game. Multiplayer offers splitscreen co-op campaigns as well as a customisable on- and offline deathmatches, but the lack of any real innovation makes their inclusion seem rather perfunctory rather than an enhancement to the complete package. With *Rainbow Six*'s siblings offering such dynamic online play, it's hard not to feel a little short-changed.



GRAND THEFT AUTO: VICE CITY STORIES

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ROCKATAR GAMES
DEVELOPER: ROCKSTAR LEEDS/NORTH PREVIOUSLY IN: E167

Busey and the beast



Lead character Vic Vance is notable for being the first *GTA* lead with a clean sheet, instead of a criminal record. That he gets bogged down into playing the gangster by *Vice City's* army of scumbags is no surprise, but the freshness of having such a novel tack is fleeting, as Vic seems content to start playing Tommy Vercetti all too quickly, too. More notably, he's the brother of Lance Vance, one of a returning cast whose star turn falls to Gary Busey's overpowering hillbilly-from-hell, Phil 'Bitch-killer' Cassidy. There's a lot more to cause offence here than in *Liberty City Stories*, but most of that sleaze and sin is lively, capably written and directed, and makes for black humour that mostly keeps its head above trashy, cardboard shock value.

Vice City Stories is a sequel that's content to revel in *GTA's* past, but of all the urban free-roamers that have been offered in recent years, there are few better places to revel than *Vice City*. Where *Liberty City Stories* was a chance to test the PSP's mettle in hosting *GTA's* framework, *Vice City Stories* is proof that the handheld can also bring it to life. The personality of Rockstar's most distinctive city is present and complete in *VCS*, and counts for much of its appeal. Script and characters are noticeably more vile and distasteful than the classic mobsters of *Liberty City*, but it's a far from jarring standpoint considering the decade of cocaine excess and fashion-tragedy vanity that it draws upon. And it's vibrant in a way that *Saints Row's* soulless but superior solidity can't outshine, 360 game or not.

But it certainly needs that confident style, not to set it apart from imitators but to rescue it from its relatives – the trademark messiness of certain aspects of the control scheme still persists. New side missions like Beach Patrol and Air Ambulance roles expand slightly on the Paramedic tasks, but the new empire-building aspect feels like little more than gang wars for the sake of profit (although that at least trickles directly into your bank account). Story missions can feel flat and plain, but they're often saved by context – such as a mindless rampage goal that suddenly takes on new life when it involves filming scenes for a zombie movie in the Northpoint Mall. It's one of the game's strengths: the ability to cherry-pick from its own history, as well as that of the '80s.

While its cons are familiar, the pros make up some of the best déjà vu that gaming has to offer – playful but wieldy vehicle handling, a soundtrack that's iconic without feeling lazily commercial, staged in an urban caricature whose persona helps paper over the texture pop-up. And that déjà vu means you already know whether or not you can cope with the slapdash combat, imprecise character movement, regular glitches and uncaring mission checkpoints.

The greatest praise to be levelled at *Vice City Stories* is not that it's *GTA* on PSP – that accolade has already been heaped onto *Liberty City Stories* many times over – but that it's *Vice City on PSP*. It's a distinction that will mean little to series critics, but makes it a game that matters for anyone who still wants more. And for those who favour *Vice City* above all else from *GTA's* back catalogue, it's the perfect '80s revival: a chance to live in the past, and love it. **[7]**



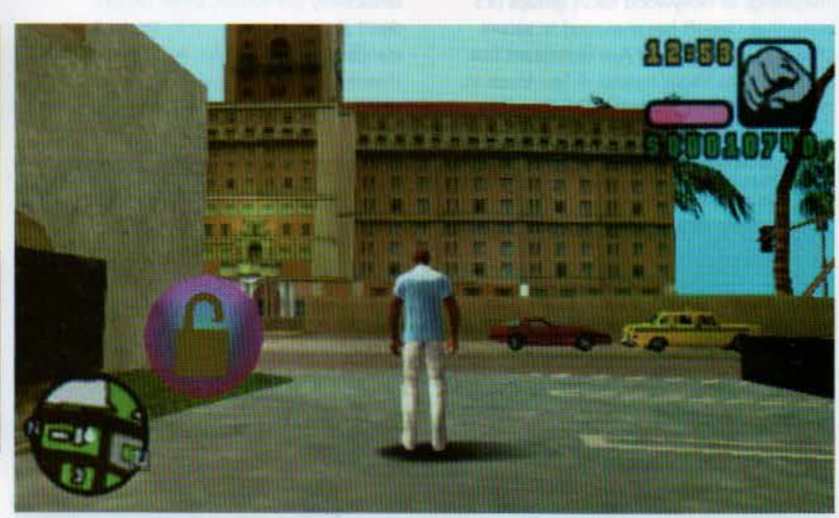
Of the aspects of *GTA* that are regularly hijacked, there's one few seem to covet, but we wish they would – conversation pace. *VCS* confirms Rockstar's knack for producing dialogue with natural flow, valuing voice directing as much as acting



Instead of 100 hidden packages, there are now – of course – 99 red balloons to shoot out of the air. As well as reviving the aircraft of PS2 *Vice City*, *VCS* also throws a BMX, quad and jetski into its line-up



It's still surprising just how flat-chested *Vice City* is next to *Liberty City* and *San Andreas* – its map needs no contour lines. Character is added by landmarks and skylines, and it's a place that's perfectly suited to both cruising and speeding, with many long lazy roads and waterfronts making the best of its hallmark sunsets









CALL OF DUTY 3

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED) PS2, PS3, XBOX PRICE: £45 (360) £30 (OTHERS)
RELEASE: NOVEMBER 10 (360) NOVEMBER 24 (PS2) MARCH 2007 (PS3)
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: TREYARCH PREVIOUSLY IN: E166, E168

After the long-standing success of *Call of Duty 2*, development of the third instalment has been removed from series-creator Infinity Ward, but it's still in *COD* hands – those of Treyarch, responsible for *Big Red One*. Focusing solely on the Normandy breakout and the liberation of Paris, a noticeable shift in setting from the intercontinental tour of WWII in the previous game, *Call Of Duty 3* follows the familiar formula of leaping between the forces of Allied nations, their stories and actions intertwined throughout 14 chapters. But rather than change the game's tune, Treyarch has chosen to turn up the volume, and deliver a more visceral and hectic experience.

It's largely a success. Capably intense, and decorated with unobtrusive depth of field, heat haze and camera shake, it's a procession of set-pieces that unravel as if you've inadvertently stumbled onto WWII: The Ride. It's all just a linear progression of pre-scripted fireworks – but as restrictive as this sounds, the pace rarely drops long enough to expose the mechanics. You're assaulted from all sides, and at all times, but the increased head and body count reflects a simple trick – both Allies and Nazis will respawn in most setups, until you push on to the invisible waypoint that makes your team advance and initiates the next bid to gain ground. Environments are larger and less corridor-like than before, producing greater possibilities for multiple routes, and battles are busier and harsher than before. It results in stand-offs that can match, if not exactly replicate, the tension of *COD2*'s Silo sniping and Stalingrad city hall corral missions, but don't expect anything as measured as the Trainyard push. And the precision-aim gunplay – the unsung hero in the whirl of all that big-bucks warfare – remains clean, sharp and satisfying. Indeed, the focus on gunplay is so intense that previous movement options, like the ability to vault small obstacles, have been removed, except in pre-determined circumstances. This can frustrate, and the introduction of input-prompt minigames is hardly compensation: fending off troops or rowing a boat across a river in full view of an Axis hotspot does break up the linearity of events, but can feel more tiresome than engaging.

All told, this serves well as a third chapter, conscripting much of what has gone before while upping the testosterone and providing some glamorous distractions to pry your attention away from how little control you actually have over events. It's hardly innovative, but a capable, confident rollercoaster ride nonetheless, built to keep willing players holding on tight throughout, despite the shudders at its low points. **[7]**





One particular mission puts you at the controls of a Sherman tank as you fend off the enemy over a backdrop of rolling countryside. Offering more flexibility in combat, this short-lived section is one of *Call Of Duty 3*'s finer vehicular moments



If you're loading a mission checkpoint after quitting the game or booting up the 360, you're forced to watch that stage's intro cinematic all over again. Likely intended as a smokescreen for loading, it means you won't be seeing combat for somewhere between one and two minutes

At set points throughout the campaign you'll find yourself ambushed and forced into the trigger-bashing weapon-wrestle minigame. These dramatic scripted events unfortunately never pose any real threat or tension; a grunt with a machine gun is by far the deadlier

Introducing the wheel



Despite its online flaws (the lack of host options, and an eight-player limit), *Call Of Duty 2* managed to ride high on Live thanks to its forgiving fanbase. Treyarch has approached multiplayer more studiously, with support for up to 24 players, and a *Battlefield*-like class system featuring seven different character occupations whose abilities translate straightforwardly into tactics – Medics are able to heal fallen allies, Scouts call in artillery strikes and so on. In addition to this, fully operational vehicles have also been added: jeeps, tanks and motorcycles (plus sidecar) are all available, bringing multiplayer closer to feeling as action-oriented as the singleplayer game.



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED) PS3 PRICE: £50
RELEASE: OUT NOW (360) MARCH 7 (PS3) PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SONIC TEAM PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E165

The game opens with a typically cheery and lush locale – the kind that always sparks up the hope that *this* could be the one to bring *Sonic's* 2D vitality to 3D life. Five swift and unwarranted deaths later, all such hope is gone

Hi ho new guy



Like Shadow, Silver has brought his own shtick – psychokinesis – to stand him apart from Sonic. He handles more reliably than Sonic, due to his more measured movement, and the act of sucking up nearby objects and blasting them at enemies isn't very precise, but doesn't need to be. But the broken framework beneath it all still hinders whatever enjoyment there is. Other sub-characters become playable within each of the three main campaigns – and even these can be sour. For example, Tails' erratic flight allows no accuracy, his ring bombs – which use the same sound effect as the player taking a hit – can make combat confusing, and his firstperson aiming ability throws the camera in and out of disorienting twists.

Maybe it's that rebellious attitude of his. That could explain Sonic's disastrously skittish controls – what more significant a rebellion could a videogame character perform than to leave the player feeling out of control? Trying to get the game's main playable trio – Sonic, Shadow and Silver (see 'Hi ho new guy') – under the thumb is like trying to shake hands with a waterfall, with least success when dealing with Sonic himself. It feels less like a platformer and more like a high-wire balancing act, a bid to keep your character on course rather than plummeting to their doom yet again. There's no room for subtle movement, and attacking enemies using Sonic's homing-jump attack can be a lucky dip when you're close to the edge of a platform, especially with a perspective that can't provide a handy view of the ground-based foes down below.

Whether through a slapdash snowboarding section, the complete lack of camera options, a dull boss battle or a glitchy moment when a rail, catapult, loop-the-loop or some other device designed to send you pinging simply drops you to your doom, controls feel hazy where they need to feel tight, and unfair death syndrome is still alive, well and infuriating. What's perhaps even more saddening than any unwieldiness is that when a section of a level does manage to flow and swings by in an exciting on-rails blur, you're treated to a glimpse of the series' former brilliance: a slick, showboating journey through a vibrant, funfair-like platforming environment – a glimpse of *Sonic's* side-on sparkle that, once again, hasn't translated well to 3D. And when you're snapped back to the actuality of *Sonic The Hedgehog* by one frustrating incident or other, you're just left to consider the game's self-defeating nature – the less control you have, the more playable it becomes.

There's replay value, ironically enough, via mission ranks and collectables, but your increased confidence in controlling the game's characters is simply damage limitation rather than any improved sense of command. The consistently poor controls of Sonic's 3D outings make it seem like Sonic Team has convinced itself that this is how this aspect of the franchise should rightly be, and everyone else should just learn to deal with it. The irrepressibly funky camp of the soundtrack and the fun-loving vibe of the game's style can only compensate for so much, and Sonic, that world-famous 'hedgehog with attitude', is now in danger of being remembered as the 'hedgehog with an attitude problem.' **[3]**



The city of Soleanna forms the hub. Simple optional goals are there to complete, but they're bland and, inexplicably, go through four loading screens between start and finish



When hit, only *some* of your rings drop, a forgiving detail in what can be an unforgiving game. At the end of a stage your rings are put into an account to be spent at shops, but it's often a pittance next to the bonuses for top grades







Without giving too much away, advances in scientific knowledge combine with the inexorable forces of passing history to ensure that the world rapidly expands beyond its initial perimeters by the sixteenth century



Naval battles are also possible, though all of these are automatically resolved. We'll wait with bated breath for a maritime realisation of *Total War*





MEDIEVAL II: TOTAL WAR

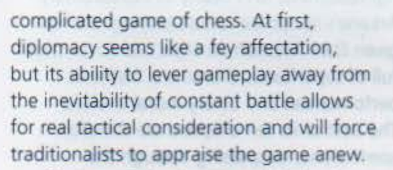
FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: NOVEMBER 10
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY

True to form, *Medieval II: Total War* tempts the usual litany of high-praise review clichés: breathtaking, sweeping, spectacular, immersive, cinematic, epic. And it's true enough that this latest evolution of the ever-improving *Total War* series sates each of these charges comfortably, delivering the visual goods in abundance, especially in realtime battle. But it's far more than just a simple technological revision of its revered predecessor: it's an entire recalibration of how campaigns are balanced and waged. Aside from a very few niggling discrepancies, it's an almost flawless experience – one which, having demanded a heavy investment of both time and thought, richly pays off.

Kicking off this time at the start of the 11th century, you play the head of a warring faction hellbent on global dominion. By careful use of resource management (allied to a superbly realised building/training dynamic) you slowly raise your armies to conquer the known world. Moving along this destructive/reconstructive trail, you also have to maintain the cities and countries you already control, forcing the populace to bend to your dictatorial will.

Almost every aspect of the map-based interface has markedly improved. For a start, movement is far more manageable since it's now restricted to the distance it's estimated a given unit could travel in a turn, undoing the illogicality of the first *Medieval*'s unrealistic turn-based country hopping. Visually, the map has transformed from bland yellow parchment to a fertile representation of real green land, complete with geographical landmarks and a seasonal weather system.

Brand new is the concept of the diplomat, a character under your control whose errand is to negotiate with opposing factions, turning RTS into something akin to a very complicated game of chess. At first, diplomacy seems like a fey affectation, but its ability to lever gameplay away from the inevitability of constant battle allows for real tactical consideration and will force traditionalists to appraise the game anew.



Stills really don't do much justice to the astounding flow of masses of troops in combat (right). It's not just the men, machines and horses that shine in real time battle: environments are lovingly detailed, comprehensively explorable realms in which it's easy to get carried away dragging your omnipotent POV over every nook and cranny

Advances in hardware and, indeed, The Creative Assembly's own engine, have rendered the realtime battle animations truly jaw-dropping. Each tiny, motion-captured movement is a reward in itself, so much so that being transfixed by the solitary motion of a cannon loader or the naturalistic whinnying of a horse can distract from the brutal task at hand. Units are immediately responsive, your proficiency in using them increasing with each new battle. Having now built on *Rome*'s legacy, it's daunting to think where the developer will turn next.

The current game isn't, however, perfect. Firstly, an option to automatically resolve battles outside of realtime play is unfairly weighted against you, though perhaps fair punishment for wanting to skip the beautiful spectacle in the first place. More serious are the stuttering on-screen spasms when other factions are resolving their turns: the smooth visuals suddenly turn skittishly irritating.

These are, however, infinitesimal problems in a game with almost infinite replay value, a game whose accomplishments will age only when its creators vow to forge something even better. **[8]**

Select Units

As your armies grow more powerful, defeating enemies can start to become quite easy. To that end, this custom battle mode enables you to hone your skills against a fairly proportioned enemy. Because you develop your own preferences in the main game, you'll also learn how to use units you wouldn't usually command, opening further opportunities when you return to the staple singleplayer campaign



Revised retinue



New non-diplomatic playable figures include priests, merchants and assassins. Priests will rid your lands of pagan heretics, while themselves struggling to get elected to a College of Cardinals, the ultimate aim of which is the papacy. Merchants help to rally resources into cash, while assassins, rather obviously, murder irritating enemies. Use of these results in well-paced filmic cutscenes with a variety of endings depending on the outcome of each encounter across the medieval world. Princesses also return with a new active role in diplomatic affairs: marrying them off to interested parties will abate your foes or, should your strategy call for it, cosy up to allies. You can also gain new family members in this way.



DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 (RETAIL), $50 (£26) (STEAM)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: ARKANE/KUJU PREVIOUSLY IN: E161

Map quest



Developed independently at Kuju, *Dark Messiah*'s multiplayer mode is a faithful application of online goals and tactics to the singleplayer world of Ashan. A classic fight between the living and the undead, its Crusade gametype moves back and forth along a linear sequence of five maps rather than cycling them randomly. The result: a tangible penetration of enemy territory through repeat victories. Skill trees for the five available classes – Archer, Knight, Mage, Assassin and Priestess – can be built and retained throughout each campaign, the base abilities for each being enough to stop those of higher levels dominating the lesser ranks. It's a promising set-up that benefits from its *Battlefield* roots, sadly marred by technical issues; load times and latencies both proving erratic under test.

The story of *Dark Messiah* is best told by notes: a flurry of frantic emails between **Edge** and PRs, an apologetic footnote to a Review intro, and a Valve forum full of anger and makeshift bugfixes. Review code suspicions borne out by a problematic Steam release begged the question of whether the game would load at all, and it's taken a boxed retail edition and several online patches to establish that it does. All that's now required to enjoy the game at its brisk, if unpredictable, best is a midrange PC and a modest step down from Source's assumed default settings.

The story of hero Sareth, damned by his blood to become a master of the darkest arts and torn between the twin forces of fate and righteousness, isn't nearly as extraordinary. Arkane's lip service to role-playing lore has given *Dark Messiah* an objective-driven plot full of superfluous characters, histrionic performances and binary moral choices. The best of its ten chapters are therefore spent alone, trespassing through the majestic domains of its brilliant creatures. Gabe Newell has (unsurprisingly) expressed pride in what it's achieved; Ray Harryhausen might also.

Even in the bowels of principal city Stonehelm, its departures from civilisation are absolute and consuming. The temples, catacombs and precipices come stocked with fiendish traps and architectural treasures, and step beyond the grind with strong artistic, behavioural and environmental design that benefits each enemy encounter. *Dark Messiah*'s speedily acquired reputation for having the best melee combat of any RPG is thoroughly deserved, if a tad misleading. While it borrows liberally from the pen-and-paper genres, it's a visceral action game at heart, its dice rolls dressed exclusively in elemental witchcraft and blood.

With momentum, vigour and insight, it has much of what fantasy games all too often lack and little of what they rely upon. Its conversations are scripted and pre-rendered but the feeling of participation – of real, immediate danger – is intense. Aided by a magnificent soundtrack that cuts air and bone with equal relish, its swordplay is a metronomic discipline of blocks, kicks, critical hits and decisive amputations. Its weapons can truly be said to wreak Havok on their victims, whether cast in metal or conjured by the hands.

The wisdom with which you bind the many spells, potions and weapons to the intuitive shortcut bar factors heavily in fights – which regularly build into interspecies, inter-class rumbles – but so too do gimmicks. Why anyone would wallpaper their territory in head-puncturing spikes is a mystery, but much of the game – too much – relies upon you exploiting such ubiquitous props. Conversely, impromptu tactics such as stealth-shoving enemies off cliffs and charming them into a fight with their friends never grow old.

Sareth's adventure does tire, however, during later moments when the game leaves you with neither an objective nor waypoint, but instead an arduous hunt for the next NPC trigger or gateway. What you might call a rough-and-stumble approach leaves it open to such irks, incidental for the most part but compounded by the occasional unpatched glitch. It's an irony that PC gamers must be growing tired of, the most devoted again suffering the worst a game has to offer. **[7]**



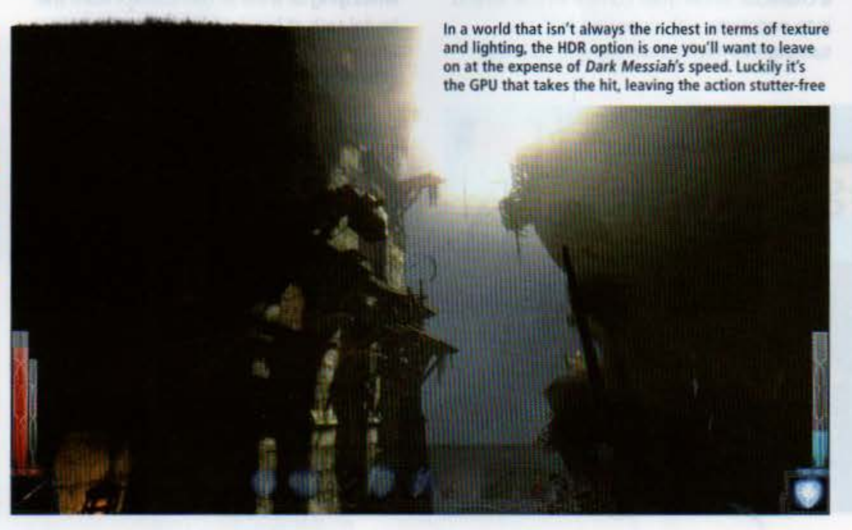
A cunning lift from *Half-Life 2* gives object handling unexpected swiftness. Essentially the gravity gun pick-up action sans gun model, it sucks nearby objects straight to your inventory



Combat rewards preparatory toil (inventory, mana and health) with spontaneous, effects-laden action. Successive hits and parries trigger an adrenaline state that fuels aggressive play







In a world that isn't always the richest in terms of texture and lighting, the HDR option is one you'll want to leave on at the expense of *Dark Messiah*'s speed. Luckily it's the GPU that takes the hit, leaving the action stutter-free



SUPER MONKEY BALL: BANANA BLITZ

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £40 RELEASE: DECEMBER 8
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164

Minigame disease. It's going to be endemic on Wii, at least for a while, and *Super Monkey Ball* has always had been susceptible to party games, so it shouldn't come as a surprise that its debut on the new Nintendo has come down with an absolutely chronic case: no less than 50 games, with regular pursuits joined by snowboarding, frisbee golf, submarining, yachting and shepherding. It's a knee-jerk reaction, and it ignores the self-imposed restrictions that make the best party game compilations work: either time (*Wario Ware* or *Bishi Bashi*) or number (*Wii Sports* or, indeed, the original *Super Monkey Ball*, both models of minigame economy and refinement). Many games are embarrassingly awful, and the diamonds – a beautifully transposed Target, or a clever rocket-landing game like a 3D *Thrust* – get lost in the rough.

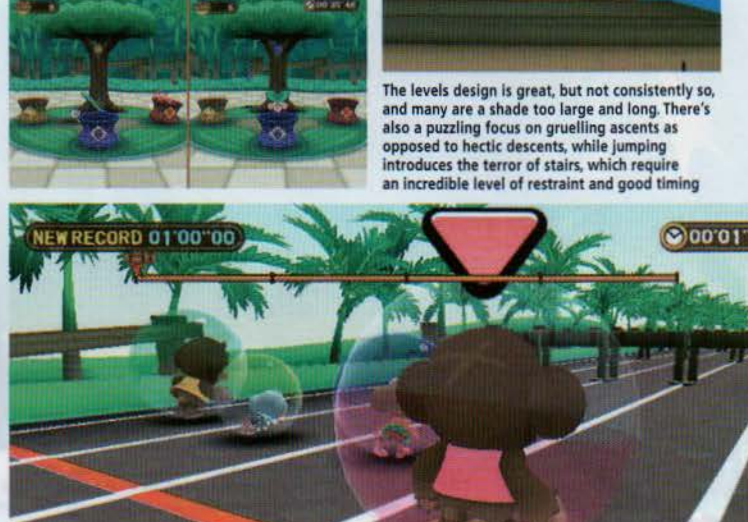
Oddly, *Banana Blitz*'s singleplayer game exhibits exactly the studied, thoughtful response to the Wii Remote that its minigames lack. *Super Monkey Ball*'s tilt-based gameplay seems such a natural fit that it would have been easy to take its suitability for granted, but Sega has instead taken a long hard look and redesigned its game from the ground up. The Remote (or perhaps your wrist) simply isn't capable of the same degree of positional precision as a thumbstick – maybe it might have been in the lateral, two-handed grip, but Sega opted against that – so the courses are broader and require less extreme finesse. They're also more dynamic, to the point of including enemies and, at the end of every one of the ten worlds, a boss fight. The most profound change is of course the jump button, which has a radical effect on later levels; it's a surprisingly welcome addition, prompting even more daredevil shortcuts and improvised, teetering escapes.

If it all sounds like a bastardisation of the purest game in recent memory, well, it is – but the end result is to bring *Monkey Ball* even closer to something it always resembled that is in woefully short supply these days: a tight little platform game in the classic style, reminiscent of the genre's earliest days in the arcade. The rethink has inspired some of the most cunning, least arbitrary *Monkey Ball* level designs since the first game, and though *Banana Blitz* is the model of accessibility, it's also plenty tough enough – a game of this type simply has to be to be worth playing at all. The lack of a ruthless score-attack structure (levels are opened ten at a time, and game over doesn't mean start again) will always disappoint purists, and rightly so. But the open-access approach won't stop you obsessively playing one level 30 times in a row, whether it's to clear it for the first time or nail an improbable high-scoring stunt. *Banana Blitz* is precarious, hilarious, debilitating addictive, unfair in the fairest way possible; yes it's a different game, a less uncompromising one, but at its heart it's *Monkey Ball* through and through. **[7]**

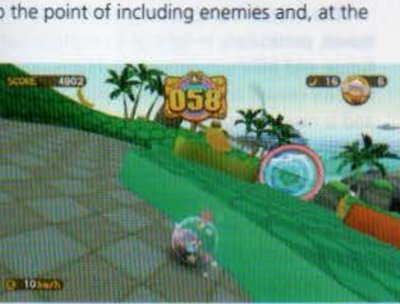




The levels design is great, but not consistently so, and many are a shade too large and long. There's also a puzzling focus on gruelling ascents as opposed to hectic descents, while jumping introduces the terror of stairs, which require an incredible level of restraint and good timing



Banana Blitz is an attractive game in singleplayer, colourful and robust with terrific character art, although perhaps it lacks some of the sheer vibrancy of the original. Minigames are less consistently pretty, while the grating muzak that accompanies it all is best not mentioned, and turned down



It's already clear the Wii is going to be a convivial console, and the general bonhomie of gathering together a group to waggle, wiggle and wobble their way to victory does wonders for initially disguising the disappointment of many of the minigames' poor designs and wearing control schemes



Juggling balls



Banana Blitz adds two characters to the classic roster of AiAi, Baby, MeeMee and GonGon: sleeve-flapping mad monkey scientist the Doctor, and combative cutie YanYan. They're great, immediately appealing additions, and more than just cosmetic because *Banana Blitz*, with its heavier physics, features much more pronounced differences in the monkeys' handling. Some have longer jumps too, or a smaller ball, or the ability to kill rather than bounce off enemies, or destroy bumpers. You can change monkeys at the level select screen, and learning the optimal monkey to squeeze every last point from a level will be one of the biggest incentives to go back and replay the game once it's been beaten.



Practice mode (right) is perhaps the most significant addition to the game, encouraging painstaking precision as well as raw skill. There are few players who won't have to resort to it: the difficulty may have been smoothed throughout, but the toughest songs are more demanding than any in the original





Miss a long note, particularly the last of the song, and the crowd will give a low groan, emphasising the sophisticated relationship between your performance and what's on screen.



GUITAR HERO II

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £50 (WITH GUITAR) £30 (SOLO)
RELEASE: NOVEMBER 24 PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: HARMONIX PREVIOUSLY IN: E168



Second coming



Sequels can often feel a bit soulless, but *Guitar Hero II* has more charisma than the original, filling the screen with character and humour whenever you can tear your eyes away from those scrolling notes. The humour – of which there is plenty – veers from wryly knowing observations of the gruelling reality of trying to make it as a rock band, to exuberant parodies of exuberant parodies of rock excess (above). The characters, complete with a variety of unlockable outfits and implausible special moves, are much more alive than in the original, and there's a surprising amount of glee to be had from inserting a be-denimed metalhead into a '70s prog-rock extravaganza.

Guitar Hero II comes bundled with the wrong peripheral. The new cherry red Gibson SG may be very handsome, but it should have shipped with a Tubigrip. This, let's be clear, is going to hurt. Even if a continuing obsession with the first game has left your ligaments limber, the new reliance on three-note chords and first-to-fifth fret changes is going to stretch you; if you're a *GH* novice or a lapsed expert, it's going to punish you.

It's hard to think of a game that's ever caused so much pain by doing so much right. Any tendon damage *GH* inflicts is your fault, and yours alone, as the game lures you into an extended play session.



Core mechanics like the multiplier-boosting rock power remain unchanged, but co-operative multiplayer requires that both players trigger it at the same time, producing some excellent theatre alongside maximised scores

All the strengths of the first original are replicated – the joyous flair of the melodies' transcriptions, the grandstanding grind of the power chords, the deceptively accurate cover versions of rock classics both familiar and unknown – and its those strengths that leave you helpless to resist that one-more-go lure, even when your arms are useless tubes of acid and your flatmates are threatening violence. Worse, the sequel effectively removes all hope of recovery by fixing nearly all of the original's few shortcomings.

So, as well as offering rhythm and bass alternatives to lead guitar, multiplayer now offers co-operative play and the ability to set separate difficulty levels. Practice mode lets you pick out a particular section of a particular song and master it at a slower speed, and the balance between boringly easy verse/chorus sections and dauntingly hard instant-kill solos has been smoothed. The song choice – although likely to contain fewer familiar names, particularly for non-American players – is if anything wider than the first game's, running from The Police to Megadeth and from Dick Dale to Suicidal Tendencies. And, as before, it's a game with the ability to entirely subvert your music taste, leaving you shamelessly humming the hits of Heart and Kansas which you previously might well have shunned.



Dropping a combo is represented by a subtle dimming and shake of the screen, and a detailed score breakdown allows for improved scrutiny of your stage performance

The overall impression *Guitar Hero II* leaves, particularly in light of its multiformat future and MTV's investment in Harmonix, is that it's ceased to be a stand-alone game, and is now a platform in its own right. There's little that needs to be fixed in the framework and core mechanics (although it would be nice to be able to loop practice mode sections, and nicer still to be able to return direct from it to the same song in the main game); from here on its just a question of adding new, and hopefully more original, tracks. All that limits its future is the world's total reservoir of good guitar music. And as this proves, that resource runs a lot deeper than you might think. **[8]**



NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2

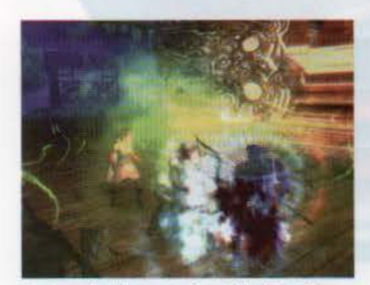
FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: OBSIDIAN

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Post-Black Isle RPG house Obsidian finds itself working with a BioWare property again – its second sequel to a series it didn't start. But unlike the disappointingly unfinished *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic 2*, this follow-up to *Neverwinter Nights*' exhaustive translation of tabletop D&D to PC – featuring a sprawling singleplayer or co-op campaign and a comprehensive modding toolkit – is a far better display of flourish.

It's most obvious in the game's engaging script, with a deft touch for dialogue all-but-excusing an adherence to D&D story cliché as unbending as that to its ruleset. Those hoping for the second coming of *Planescape: Torment* will be gently disappointed, with neither story nor characters ever quite ringing so consistently inspired, but *NN2*'s interaction is morally driven and branches believably. Even the more mechanical sidequests invite ethical exploration – with significant impact.

At the risk of name-checking every D&D title of the last decade, on a social level it's perhaps closer to the *Baldur's Gate* series than its predecessor: the make-up of your impressionable party affects the quests you encounter, and more often than not the manner in which you'll approach them.

Up to three characters can accompany you at a time, selected from an ever-building army who'll otherwise wait – and quarrel – at your base of operations. What they lack in character design (there's a visual slump to the proceedings, suggesting the Forgotten Realms' 20-year existence has wearied art direction), they make up for in sympathetic writing. Following



Despite only being an update of the first *NN* engine, the pyrotechnics can look spectacular. Occasionally the more arid regions look a little blocky, but otherwise ugly tiling is long gone, replaced by rich exteriors and detailed buildings

D&D RPG convention, the frequent combat can be left to run in realtime or paused to issue orders, and supporting characters' behaviour tweaked or left entirely under your control. The new-edition ruleset may still appear overcomplicated to lapsed or first-time d20-rollers, but much can be left behind the scenes with optional streamlining – and one of the system's more significant additions, 'attacks of opportunity', will be instantly appreciable to any console or PC SRPG buff.

Despite the increased complexity of the engine, the accompanying editor is even more powerful and approachable than before. Still a development tool brushed up to user-friendliness as opposed to one dedicated from the outset to game-building, there's scope to build everything from a two-hour co-op dungeon crawl to a 100-hour purple-prosed epic. It's that breadth that makes *NN2* as much of an essential purchase as genre fans could ask for – more than it needed to be, given that it's currently flying their standard alone. **[8]**



Many 'dungeons' are outdoors, providing a refreshing change from the norm, but revealing their linear nature more starkly. The level design's strongest feature are the scripted, but seemingly ad-libbed, conversations that enliven set points



SID MEIER'S RAILROADS!

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES DEVELOPER: FIRAXIS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164



Cities will develop according to the goods you transport to them. This burgeoning town has developed a thriving weapons factory thanks to trains bearing nitrates and steel being sent there

Despite its generic buildings and anachronisms, *Railroads!* takes pride in its portrayal of period engines and carriages. It may well reawaken the spotter that resides inside every gamer

Sid Meier has repeatedly said that games are 'a series of interesting decisions', but while reshaping the classic *Railroad Tycoon* may have been an intersting decsion for him, the result isn't for the player. Taking the template laid down in the original, *Railroads!* casts you as a transport baron in an untapped pre-industry world. Play could hardly be simpler – you merely link cities, outlying towns and settlements with long, looping steel tracks, drop a station and engine along the route, and watch the lucre rise from the smog.

Every complication you can imagine has been stripped back. There's none of the infrastructure you'd associate with railroads: no need to lay down signals or turntables, no worries about setting ticket prices or building facilities. Cities and the industry you need to link them with are literally next door to each other – you can be making money within less than ten clicks of the mouse.

That's not to say it's stress free. It's a highly competitive game, whether played with AIs or through the new multiplayer modes. This is a game that actively encourages the hostile take-over, and that sees you constantly engaged in bidding and pricing wars for bonus patents and industrial centres. Each player has ten 'shares' available for purchase and, with the profits from your enterprise, you can buy out a competitor, receiving a share of their wealth or – in the event of a 100 per cent stake – their entire network. It's the ultimate in boardroom humiliation: being kicked out of your own company.

Unfortunately, the mechanics feel whisper-thin. The decisions you face in the course of playing *Railroads!* aren't interesting, they're just questions of attentiveness – ensuring your trains are making money on each side of their journey, that you're not pulling empty carriages, that your most profitable goods reach their destination as quickly as possible. Your strategy is simply about dropping costs and increasing profits, watching the red numbers dwindle while the green ones increase.

It's an easy game to see through, and to eventually exploit. Working out how the game works and how to best profit from your stock takes an hour's play, and from then on, it's no longer about thinking creatively, just economising ruthlessly. Satisfying perhaps, but hardly demanding. **[6]**





NEED FOR SPEED CARBON

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED) GC, PC, PS2, PS3, Wii, XBOX PRICE: £50 RELEASE: TBA (PS3, Wii) OUT NOW (OTHERS) PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: EA BLACK BOX PREVIOUSLY IN: E166







Capturing each major district means a showdown with the territory's owner, which ends in a 'Boss' event. These are inventive duels, where you gain points for tailing your rival as closely as possible

It's not as if EA's market-leading urban-tuner racer is ever going to need to defend its turf from the likes of *PGR3* and *Test Drive Unlimited*, but, for anyone versed in Bizarre Creations' and Eden Studio's exemplary driving titles, it's hard for *Carbon* not to feel like a lesser experience, even as an arcade outing. Not that it has anything but the utmost faith in its own style – *Carbon's* gloss is unparalleled. Even if you're not persuaded by its aesthetics, it's hard not to admire the unique overkill of its cosmetics, with *Auto Modellista*-style speed lines wrapping your vehicle as it hits a high gear, and street lamps whizzing by in a trail of flare lighting so exaggerated that they look like electrified sperm cells. And its extreme audio-visual approach is hardest to resist when it comes to the splendidly overblown, almost animalistic, roar and supercharged whine of each vehicle's engine, soured by the cheap, clanking thuds of collisions.

In among *Need For Speed's* established formula of respect-upping race events and orgy-like decal and vinyl application (plus aftermarket car parts that can which can now be 'Autosculpted' to fine-tune their design, a Game Face of sorts for petrolheads) *Carbon* introduces Wingmen. Of the three Wingman types available, self-explanatory Blockers are the most effective and user-friendly, but Scouts and Drafters threaten to become as much an obstacle as a benefit, needing to be in front of the player to do their stuff but just as likely as anyone to get tangled up in the city's traffic. And dodging that traffic highlights the game's handling model, responsive and satisfying for shallow steering and sweeping bends, but becoming something far less wieldy for tight turns and sharp skids, a sensation that only fades as you unlock the upper tiers of vehicles.

But, in such a fulsome package, there's still something to love. Race War events and Canyon Races are most enjoyable, stripping *Carbon* back to its track/opponents essentials, a focus that's just as pleasurable in the purer parts of the game's Challenge Series, predefined events that'll throw you straight onto the starting grid with a tuned-up motor and no other fuss. From here, *Need For Speed* seems like it would benefit from choosing a priority to stick to: be either a rowdy pursuit rampage or a lustrous street racer unbothered by traffic or law enforcement, as mixing both can leave it feeling much less than the sum of its generously many parts. **[6]**



LUMINES II

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: BUENA VISTA GAMES DEVELOPER: Q! ENTERTAINMENT PREVIOUSLY IN: E164

Lumines might be one of the most narcotic games ever made, but Q! and Buena Vista's attempt to traffic it to a larger audience has cut it like any massmarket drug. The result is still decent, deceptively time-consuming for a handheld title and a blessing to PSP's screen, but it's also quite toxic, each dose cheapening the series overall. As such, memories of Mizuguchi's original may hold more value than anything offered here, making for an unusual proposition. Highly enjoyable as it is, *Lumines II* is tough to recommend.

Inheriting a blueprint it leaves fundamentally untouched, *Lumines II* tinkers but achieves little beyond conflicting familiarity and bloat. Menus that once jumped to the beat of player inputs now lurch between options, overpopulated and overdressed, although honouring the basic gametypes. While a considerable number of old songs and skins have been used to shore up the new, the juxtaposition that results is unflattering, the new tiles, backdrops and beats lapsing from intricate synaesthesia into multimedia glut. The FMV-powered examples, suffice to say, are the most conspicuous and least successful. From Beck's Black Tambourine to Black Eyed Peas' Pump It, each makes the same mistake – extrapolating its overall theme from the video rather than the song, providing little aural interaction beyond a kluge of discordant effects.

Those that remember the uncompromising vision and challenge of the original will marvel at its sequel's further plays to the mainstream. The syncopated block-busting of its Versus mode still provides a furious opposite to Challenge's progressive marathon, but both have had their teeth pulled for the sake of accessibility. Broken down from one album of skins into several, the latter is now quick to roll over, while the former can now be immediately retried without need for a complete restart. In each case, longevity suffers. Considerate yet thoughtless, intoxicating yet polluted, *Lumines II* is every inch the game you expected it to be – just not the one you asked for. **[6]**



Lumines II shares an overall look and feel, with 360's *Lumines Live*. The PSP's speakers cannot live up to those on a TV or 5.1 system, however

Bids for credibility such as the inclusion of New Order's Regret clash with *Lumines II's* whorish overall agenda. Gwen Stefani's Hollaback Girl appears in such savagely censored form that almost half of its vocals seem to be missing





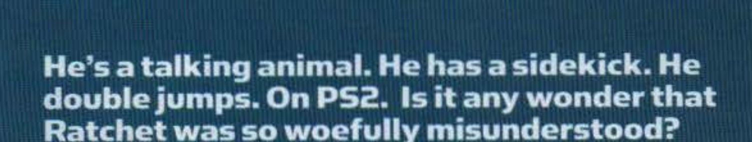

PlayStation.2

TIME EXTEND

RATCHET & CLANK 3

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **INSOMNIAC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE DATE: **NOVEMBER 2004**





He's a talking animal. He has a sidekick. He double jumps. On PS2. Is it any wonder that Ratchet was so woefully misunderstood?

You'd be excused for having overlooked *Ratchet & Clank 3*. The franchise has been set to automatic since its inception, with a new game being pumped out once every 12 months – the kind of prolific visibility that can make a series all too easy to ignore. And, from a distance, it seems to sit happily alongside any number of other Star & Sidekick games out there, slightly in the shadow of the *Jak And Daxter* games or as one-third of Sony's first-party club of cartoon mascots that was completed by *Sly Raccoon*. Each of the three seemed for a while to be vying for the position of format figurehead, an accolade was never quite to be after *Grand Theft Auto III* turned up and jacked that particular throne. And a lack of enthusiasm is understandable when it's a series fronted by a squat, furry hero with ink-blot eyes and a puppy nose, especially since Insomniac seemed determined to run it into the ground. But, in practice, it was only for the sake of turning it into fertiliser, to harvest a richer crop of of the series' potential, as proved by *Ratchet & Clank 3* – the game which best demonstrates the series' unique nature.

It's often been categorised as a platformer – a status that veers close to some kind of dismissal for a 3D game these days – but feels little of the sort in motion. Granted, it has been visited by the ghost of the *Super Mario 64* clone; high, glide and double jumps across moving platforms, hookshot swings, and battle bubbles broken up by environmental navigation. But those cobwebs are swiftly swept away – or rather, blown away – when its arsenal of weapons snaps into life with an unexpected, and utterly distinctive, brutality.

Your combat strategy is pure shock and awe, your biggest tactic excess; who needs precision when the shotgun turns the whole screen into your crosshair?



It's not as if *Ratchet & Clank 3*'s card-carrying action credentials require hours of play to bring out any subtlety. Your combat strategy is pure shock and awe, your biggest tactic









EXHIBIT NEVER-MEANT-TO B

If *Ratchet & Clank 3* has put features in place to minimise the need to reach for an FAQ, it's very nearly done the same for 'Making Of...' articles, thanks to the Insomniac Museum. It's not a new idea – it debuted in *R&C 2* – and finding it, either by locating the activation spot late at night (according to the PS2's internal clock) in a certain level or by achieving all of the game's trophies, whisks you away to a bland, office-like stage that's brimming with bonus bites and offers a lovingly guided tour of the cutting-room floor. Revolving lockets hold small mugshots of members of the development team, along with a comment to provide insight into some unused or unrefined content that didn't make it: alternative Vid-Comic levels, race courses and vehicles, character models, plus access to a special effects editor, or even a tester-sharpened selection of ultra-hard editions of the hacking minigame, along with a copy of its editor for you to tailor your own. It's one of the best heart-on-sleeve extras a dedicated fan could deserve, really.



excess; who needs precision when the Shock Blaster shotgun turns the whole screen into your crosshair? During combat, a liberating overkill of powers and ballistics can be stacked: deploy a Tesla Barrier to surround Ratchet, throw down Holoshields, activate the Agents of Doom drones (eventually upgrading to Agents of Death, with heat-seeking rockets, jetpacks and nuclear kamikaze capability) and toss out some Mini Turrets – all of this is possible before any triggers have been squeezed. To call them guns is simply too small a word; these are weapons of mass satisfaction, horrendous sci-fi handcannons that were given pride of place in the series' advertising campaigns. And off you go: throw in a few Infector rounds to turn enemies on one another. Or use the Qwack-O-Ray to turn them into suicide bomber pets. Or maybe send in a Bouncer round – a spiked mine that explodes into a Bravia advert of smaller, sticky grenades for a fountain of carnage. Or use the Rift Inducer to open up a series of electrified black holes. Or douse the fracas in a wiggly spray of searing lava. Or steam straight in flailing your Plasma Whip, a giant's shoelace of a melee weapon with a libellous range. Or, or, or... and on and on and on.

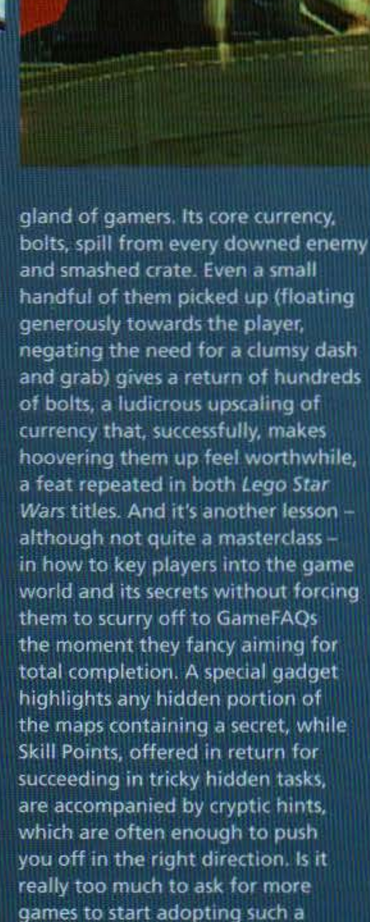




It's far from a disaster that a squat furry humanoid gets to play the star; a thick-voiced marine would never have fitted into this playfully dark cartoon world. The game even has its own chart-topping idol – Courtney Gears. A bionic parody of Britney Spears, the joy of her bouncy, colourful pop video is soon cut short by its lyrics, a call for robots to rise and up exterminate all organic life

Once the ammo of your favourite weapon is spent, there's no shortage of glee or ease in switching to the next and continuing the hi-tech bombardment. And each one upgrades through five classes of escalating devastation, too, with further black-market Acid and Shock mods optional, just in case you can still see any part of the screen before the smoke and sparkles have cleared.

And while your eye is firmly fixed on this destruction, the game's framework keeps its own on construction. *Ratchet & Clank 3*, like its forebears, is a fine lesson in tapping the obsessive-compulsive



gland of gamers. Its core currency, bolts, spill from every downed enemy and smashed crate. Even a small handful of them picked up (floating generously towards the player, negating the need for a clumsy dash and grab) gives a return of hundreds of bolts, a ludicrous upscaling of currency that, successfully, makes hoovering them up feel worthwhile, a feat repeated in both *Lego Star Wars* titles. And it's another lesson – although not quite a masterclass – in how to key players into the game world and its secrets without forcing them to scurry off to GameFAQs the moment they fancy aiming for total completion. A special gadget highlights any hidden portion of the maps containing a secret, while Skill Points, offered in return for succeeding in tricky hidden tasks, are accompanied by cryptic hints, which are often enough to push you off in the right direction. Is it really too much to ask for more games to start adopting such a willing, open-arms attitude to their secrets, to give you a torn corner of wallpaper to pull at, instead of defaulting to sending you guide-wards in need of advice?

Then, once you're hooked, how does a developer turn that hook into a shackle, and *really* extend a game's lifespan? Once the credits have been skipped, how does a designer go beyond the hollow value of unlockable skins or feeble cheats in a manner that keeps you engrossed?

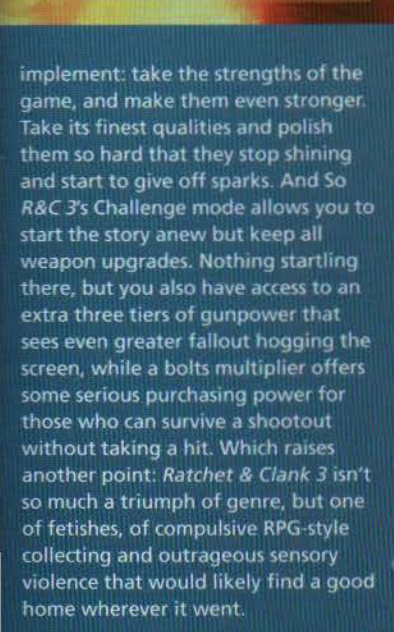
Insomniac's answer is simple, but nowhere near as straightforward to



A rare moment of genuine unease for the series: after completing a task in the game's televised Annihilation Nation battle coliseum, you're dropped into a cramped amphitheatre, leered at from the stalls by an audience of red-eyed shadows, to the accompaniment of what must be the most sinister elevator muzak ever written









Clank occasionally steps to the fore, in puzzle-based sections that see him commandeering droids to fight, unlock doors and build bridges. These stretches are smoothly executed, but never graduate from the realm of minigame

implement: take the strengths of the game, and make them even stronger. Take its finest qualities and polish them so hard that they stop shining and start to give off sparks. And So *R&C 3*'s Challenge mode allows you to start the story anew but keep all weapon upgrades. Nothing startling there, but you also have access to an extra three tiers of gunpower that sees even greater fallout hogging the screen, while a bolts multiplier offers some serious purchasing power for those who can survive a shootout without taking a hit. Which raises another point: *Ratchet & Clank 3* isn't so much a triumph of genre, but one of fetishes, of compulsive RPG-style collecting and outrageous sensory violence that would likely find a good home wherever it went.

Ratchet & Clank *3* is where this ballistic seduction blossomed, offering an approachable intensity and well-paced structure that soured slightly with the fourth title, *Ratchet: Gladiator*. While *Gladiator* took the thunder and lightning of *R&C 3*'s firearms into act-of-God territory, such glorious gunning was never given the chance to breathe during the out-and-out gauntlets and arena trials that exhaustingly made up the whole of the game. But it did offer some of the most electrifying blooms of boom to grace PS2, to the point that you had to consider that if Insomniac's ideas could grow to match its excellence of execution, then the smart money would gravitate towards this being the studio most likely to produce the next **Edge** 10/10.

Once the ammo of your favourite weapon is spent, there's no shortage of glee or ease in switching to the next and continuing the hi-tech bombardment

With *Gladiator* having taken more away from *Ratchet & Clank 3* than it gave – not sinfully so, but enough to make the penultimate act feel its most rewarding – a chapter came to an end for the franchise. Insomniac is now, of course, trying to push a new platform into established territory instead of pushing the established platformer into new territory, with first-person shooter and PS3 launch title *Resistance: Fall of Man*. That game is due to come under a mother lode of unsympathetic scrutiny – surely there's no less forgiving a litmus test than being a first-party launch title *and* an FPS. But Insomniac has already proven its ability to wring all kinds of polish and fury out of the PS2, through a process that has been industriously iterative, almost cannibalistic. Whatever *Resistance* acheives, the most crucial benchmark that future *Ratchets & Clanks* need to live up to is right here, on these very pages. Don't bring a knife to a gunfight, the saying goes. Looks like the next *Ratchet & Clank* has no choice but to invest in a bazooka if it wants to stand up to the achievements of its third instalment: a game with plenty of balls that, thankfully, isn't plagued by testosterone.

SIDE-ON QUEST

Double jumps? No blood? Then minigames are almost certain to follow, and so they did in *Ratchet & Clank 3*. Its slick and twitchy computer terminal hacking game is hardly a throwaway distraction, but the utmost love has been lavished on its other diversion: Vid-Comics. An episodic series of videogames starring Captain Quark – Insomniac's own answer to Futurama's Zapp Brannigan – they're 2D platforming gauntlets, each topped and tailed with its own storyboard intro and outro, and patter from a reluctantly enthusiastic narrator. And, of course, cut-throat speed runs are there for those who want to gobble up every last Skill Point, in a minigame that's a testament to the quality bar that Insomniac seemed to set itself for *Ratchet & Clank 3*.







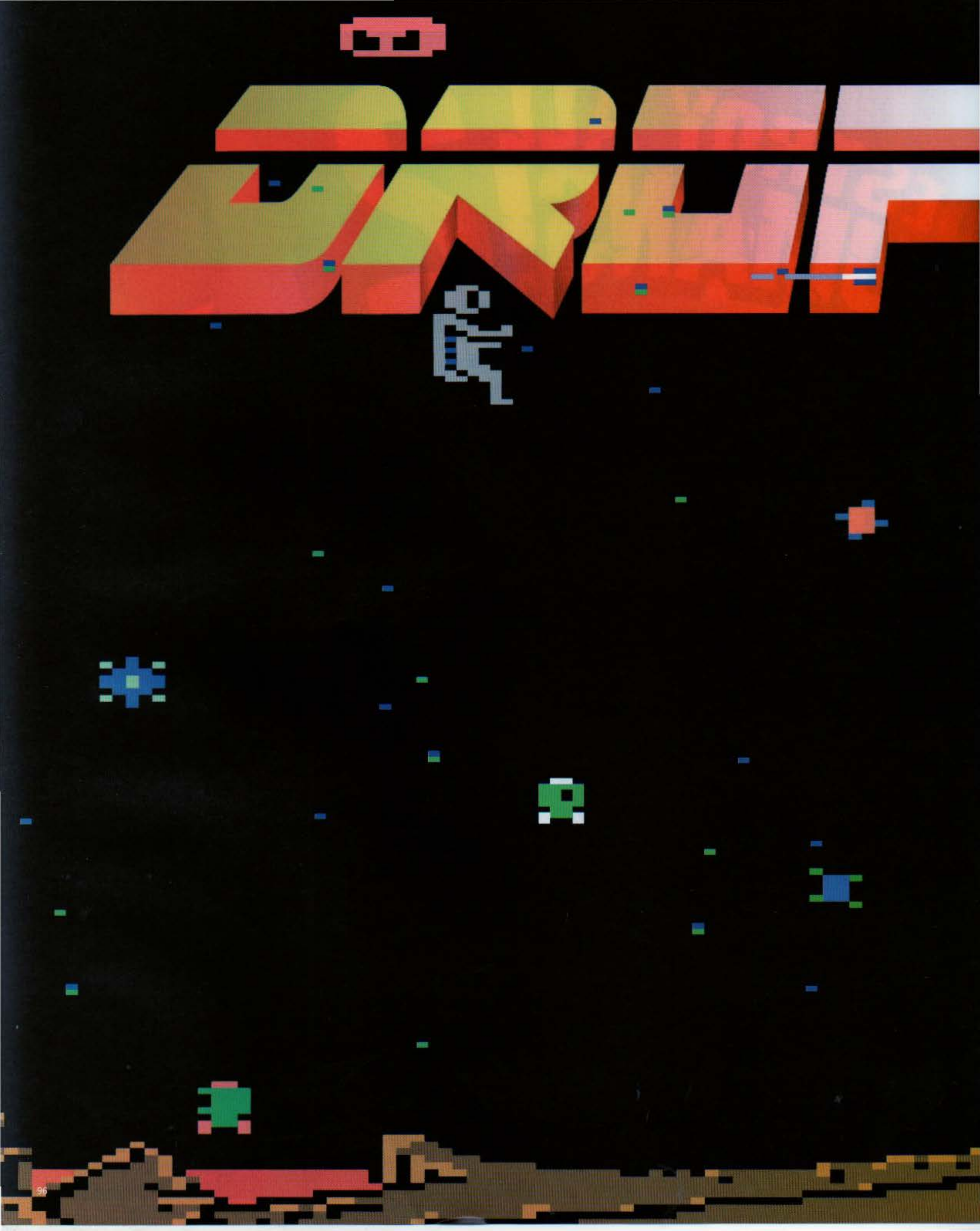


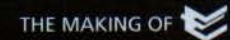












THE MAKING OF… DROPZONE

Inspired by a classic, how one man's coding experiments mutated into a superlative 8bit shooter

FORMAT: **ATARI 400/800** PUBLISHER: **US GOLD** DEVELOPER: **ARCHER MACLEAN** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE DATE: **1984**

It started with being blown away. The swarms of enemies, the exhilarating freedom of flight, the screen-filling explosions, the aural assault, the daunting array of controls… *Defender* left most who first encountered it aghast. **Archer Maclean** shared the same feelings of awe as his fellow arcade-goers, except he wasn't content with just playing. He wanted to make his own.

"It was a time before any games programmer ever thought about the legalities of looking at an arcade games and wanting to write their own interpretation," Maclean explains with a wry smile. "You saw something you liked in the arcade and tried to do it at home. Of course I was influenced by *Defender, Stargate, Scramble* and half a dozen other sideways shooters. *Dropzone* was a combination of rules from those early games, even its 'Trailer wave' was mimicking part of *Robotron*. But trying to get all that stuff flying about on the screen with an 8bit processor running at 1mhz or so… it was a question of how [illegible]

Maclean knew the limitations of what lay beneath the [illegible] shells of those early [illegible] computers. As a [illegible] late '70s, he had [illegible] homebrew machine [illegible] some handy bee[illegible] constructing NA[illegible] for a local electr[illegible] grasped the ba[illegible] code and produ[illegible]

"I saw Sta[illegible] d it blew me away. Somethin[illegible] l was happening. I made it [illegible] o find out what."

clones of S[illegible] *Breakout* b[illegible] and frenetic [illegible] remained [illegible] of reach.

Then M[illegible] home comp[illegible] anything [illegible] at an ele[illegible] Pally in [illegible] with the [illegible] working [illegible] had the [illegible] computers in the UK, had the stand directly opposite. I saw *Star Raiders* and it just blew me away. How could it throw that amount of pixels around on the 6502? How could it shift graphics around that fast and detect hits with that much happening? Something very special was happening. I made it my mission to find out what."

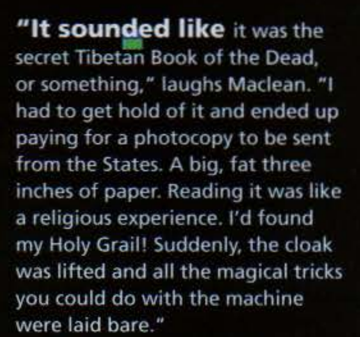
Enthused, Maclean travelled to [illegible] Silica Shop in Kent to collect an Atari 800 on the day it officially arrived on England's shores. [illegible] even the most intrepid of [illegible]plorers is in need of a map, and [illegible] had heard talk of just such a [illegible] parchment. De Re Atari, a [illegible]book produced by Chris [illegible]ford and half a dozen other [illegible]ficant engineers at Atari HQ [illegible]ifornia, seemed to be the [illegible] tome that would reveal [illegible] machine's inner treasures.





CATCHING THE CLAP

Another welcome discovery Maclean made once he'd got inside the Atari hardware was the dedicated sound chip, which allowed four channels of programmable sounds and white noise to be played simultaneously. He wrote his own custom 'noise editor' and set about creating the visceral sound effects that would score his off-world shooter. "I wanted a thunderclap for the main explosion," he explains. "I bought a BBC sound effects tape with thunder and lightning on it and played it into an oscilloscope. I noted down the envelope – the shape of the wave – and copied its timing and shape. That gave me the damn great initial clap of the game's main explosion. Then I wrote some code to prioritise the sounds. Your firing was at the top, followed by the sound when an alien fired at you as you needed to know when that was coming. Other incidental stuff was way down the list." The distressed 'wolf whistle' emitted as you rescued a stranded scientist was especially affecting. In Maclean's space, you could hear them scream...

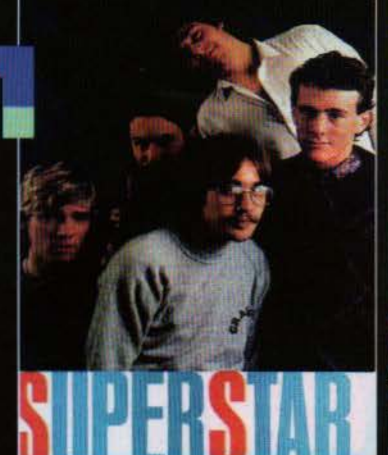


"It sounded like it was the secret Tibetan Book of the Dead, or something," laughs Maclean. "I had to get hold of it and ended up paying for a photocopy to be sent from the States. A big, fat three inches of paper. Reading it was like a religious experience. I'd found my Holy Grail! Suddenly, the cloak was lifted and all the magical tricks you could do with the machine were laid bare."

The first revelation was discovering the programmable video chip, called ANTIC, complete with its own instruction set. Sprites – or player-missile graphics as Atari dubbed them – could be sent scurrying in front off, or behind, a bit-mapped screen. The hardware could handle all the collision detection in the heat of battle. Scrolling was no longer a juddering chore, as the chip could simply be told where to open its window on this hostile world.

"The Atari screen was generally 40 characters wide, equating to 160 pixels, and the *Dropzone* planetscape was a long strip of memory 255 characters wide. I could just tell the video chip 'start here' in one instruction and suddenly it could affect the entire displayed image but without having to re-plot entire chunks of the imagery. And it could do it to the pixel for smooth scrolling! The Atari hardware was what made *Dropzone* work. I couldn't have done it without it."

Maclean had the knowledge, now he needed the time. He began the programming experiments that would eventually









Top left: Maclean looms over (l-r) Tony Crowther, Jeff Minter, Andrew Braybrook and Chris Butler in a 1985 Zzap!64 Superstar Challenge. Others: game adverts, including an early Codemasters' licence

evolve into *Dropzone* in 1981, but the demands of his University course and distractions, both alcoholic and female, meant the game had a particularly long gestation. Ironically, the final push came when things ground to a halt when his trusty 5.25 disk drive – all 100k of it – had a cup of coffee spilled to it during one-too-may all-night coding sessions. Maclean drove down to Cheshunt in London to get it fixed at the Atari UK HQ.

"They got it working and one of the engineers, John Norledge, pulled me to one side afterwards and asked me about the amazing looking demos they'd found on the disk stuck inside the drive. I said I'd done them and one thing led to another and I ended up being interviewed for a job at Atari in California, which was just a dream."

"One of the engineers pulled me to one side and asked about the demos they'd found. I ended up being interviewed for a job at Atari

Unfortunately, just as Maclean was planning a new life coding in the sun, the mighty Atari imploded in the Great Videogames Crash of '83 and he was left stranded, working under contract with Atari Europe instead. But he still had his code and a growing confidence that he could create something to match, if not exceed, his inspirations.

The increasingly nocturnal Maclean needed one final epiphany. "I was watching this old sci-fi film from the '50s late one night and it had this scene of robots on a planet's surface. I'd been experimenting with a 3D view into the screen, with the planet rolling towards you and shooting pulses into the centre a bit like the original *Star Wars* arcade game, but I got rid of all that and made it 2D again. I spent days on Pro Plus getting the landscape right. All the ideas I'd been working on over the last



DROPZONE ADVERSARIES

MAN	ANDROID	SPORE
?	?	750
PLANTER	BLUNDER STORM	TRAILER
150	250	250
NEMESITE	NMEYE	ANTI MATTER
250	100	150









Dropzone boasted a large array of adversaries. While the Trailer and Nmeye owed a debt to *Robotron* and *Defender* respectively, the Nemesite had its roots in the game's working title, *Nemesis* ("I just really liked the word" says MacLean)





The Atari 800 original made good use of the limited colours and blocky graphics of the 8bit computer

few years came together in a few weeks."

Thus Maclean's homage to the games that had defined his youth was born. He stitched together the segments of the planet and soon his jetpack-clad hero was skimming the surface, blasting an array of aliens he'd created using his own pixel editor. Explosions burst forth – 125 lumps of pixels scattered across the screen – volcanoes erupted and sound effects signalled impending attack. The droids patrolling the planet were recast as scientists in dire need of rescuing and being returned to the relative safety of The Dropzone. "It needed an endearment factor, something to compel you to shoot the enemy and protect humankind," Maclean explains.

Yet the shooter still lacked a name. The game was almost complete and Maclean had his balls in a sling. Literally. "I was into skydiving from 14,000 ft and pulling the parachute at 3,000 ft, and going from 120 miles per hour to about 10 mph in two seconds bloody hurts. Especially when you've got one of your nuts trapped! On the way down, I asked the instructor I was strapped to in a high-pitched voice if this was his own business and he said, yeah, it was called Dropzone Industries. That could work, I thought…"

Back on terra firma, the resourceful Maclean was now ready to create a stir. In an inspired piece of guerrilla marketing, he attended a PCW show at Earls Court and surreptitiously slipped his work into a conveniently-placed drive on the Atari stand.

"People started picking up the joystick and soon hundreds were crowding round. The aisles were packed. It was an incredible buzz."

The success of this impromptu field test meant Maclean had little difficulty in attracting publisher interest, eventually signing with US Gold. Released in 1984, *Dropzone* was a huge commercial and critical success. The former helped establish Maclean as a major British software developer who would go on to produce titles as diverse as *IK+*, *Jimmy White's Snooker* and *Mercury*. The latter led to links with games magazines and a sideline as a videogames columnist that has included stints with Zzap!64, Amiga User and Retro Gamer. Both careers continue to this day.

Dropzone went on to grace the C64, a conversion Maclean diplomatically describes as 'a challenge', given the inferior hardware, and licensed versions appeared for the Game Boy, NES and SNES. The game also made a brief cameo as a fully-fledged arcade machine (see 'Insert coin') but it was its inclusion on a MAME cabinet that provided Maclean with the ultimate accolade.

"I was at the California Extreme show this summer and Eugene Jarvis was there on a Q&A panel. He was describing what he had to do with the code back in the late '70s to make *Defender* work. He was explaining how he had to invent solutions to link his four code file blocks without a linker/compiler/Macro assembler, and devised self-loading jump vector tables to make files talk to each other. I sat bolt upright. That was precisely what I had to do. As I listened, I realised he'd come to the same solution as I had for so many things. I got talking to him afterwards and he'd played *Dropzone* on a MAME cab. He thought it was pretty 'neat'." And from Maclean's broad smile, it's clear he still cherishes the moment his boyhood hero expressed admiration for the auspicious debut his game had inspired.



INSERT COIN

Not content with emulating his arcade inspirations at home, Maclean managed to stand *Dropzone* proudly alongside its big brothers. In 1985, an arcade owner in Luton proposed cannibalising old *Defender* cabinets and manufacturing dedicated *Dropzone* machines using Atari 800-based internals instead. Maclean didn't need asking twice: "I rewrote the game to make it a lot harder after two minutes or so, added an demo attract mode, credit messages, coin-slot logic and so on. I remember getting an ecstatic call from this bloke saying: 'We've made £300 in the first week!' I asked where my half was. He was going to do 25, but it never happened. I'd love to know where that complete machine was though." After two decades of musing, Maclean has finally resurrected *Dropzone* as a fully-fledged arcade cabinet (above), using the original arcade code he produced for that solitary machine lurking somewhere in Luton.



Dropzone was available on many systems including this SNES port, C64 and Game Boy

Studio profile

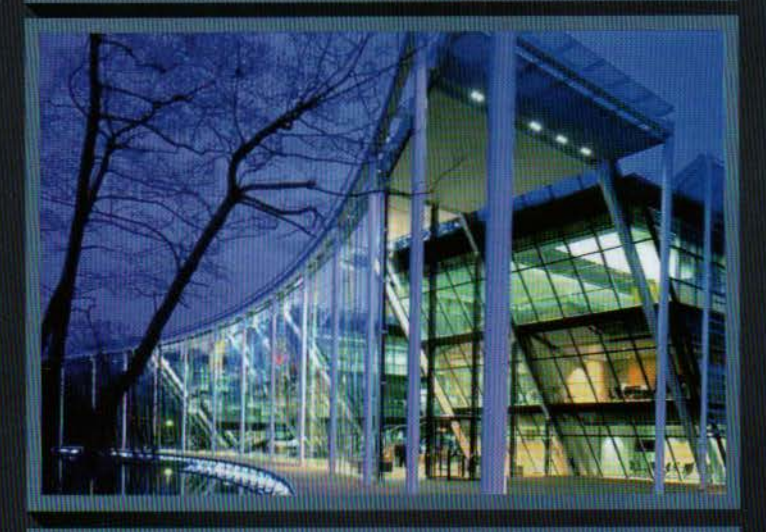
Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Electronic Arts UK

DATE FOUNDED: EA founded in 1983, Criterion Games 1995

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 500

KEY STAFF: general manager Fiona Sperry; creative director Alex Ward; executive producers Pete Hawley and Harvey Elliott



URL: www.ea.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Black, Burnout Revenge, Burnout 3: Takedown, Battlefield: Modern Combat, Harry Potter And The Goblet Of Fire and *The Prisoner of Azkaban*





From licensed characters to original IP, EA's portfolio of games ranks amongst the broadest and most successful in the videogames industry





LOCATION:
Chertsey, Guildford.

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Burnout 5, several new projects in development

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Electronic Arts UK is a creative hotbed of innovation and EA's European hub for games development in the region. Under the leadership of Fiona Sperry, former general manager of Criterion Games, creators of the genre-defining *Burnout* and *Black*, the team is leading the charge in creating world-class quality games.

"As EA moves to an increasingly diverse portfolio of new and original games, such as *Spore, Army Of Two* or *Black* in the UK, Sperry's goal is to create fresh, credible games building on the success of existing franchises like Harry Potter and innovating with new IP.

"The strategy for success is to create a world-class creative environment, centred on talent. Central to this is creating an open, no nonsense culture where passionate gamers feel empowered to innovate and make a real difference to the gaming experiences they create.

"The studio is focused on hiring the best staff in the industry and offering these talented professionals the opportunity to work on best-selling games and new creative projects, alongside some of the industry's best people who share the vision and drive to make great games."



University profile

Like Top Trumps, but for universities

INSTITUTION: University of Derby, School of Computing

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 20,000, with 400 in computing

URL: www.derby.ac.uk/games

CONTACT: games@derby.ac.uk (01332 591896)









The degree is taught in a studio-style environment by both ex and current industry professionals, with e-learning support material also provided. The games labs are among the best found in academia





LOCATION
Kedleston Road, Derby

KEY STAFF

John Sear: Programme Leader, BSc (Hons) Computer Games Programming
Guy Frost: Programme Leader, BA (Hons) Computer Games Modelling and Animation
Adam Thornett: Lecturer in Computer Games Programming
Wayne Rippin: Lecturer in Computer Games Programming
Dave Voorhis: Lecturer in Computer Games Programming

KEY ALUMNI

"Although it's a brand-new course just entering its second year, we've already had successes such as David Almond who was at Rare working on *Kameo: Elements Of Power* during his placement year. He impressed them so much he was offered a full-time job."

COURSES OFFERED

BSc (Hons) Computer Games Programming
BA (Hons) Computer Games Modelling and Animation
BSc (Hons) Computing
BSc (Hons) Computer Networks
BSc (Hons) Internet Computing
BSc (Hons) Business Computing Management

INSIDE VIEW – SCOTT DAVIES

"I began studying Computer Games Programming at The University of Derby in September 2005, and I have thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it.

"The Next Generation Development Suites are an excellent resource, not only for self-study and lectures, but also as a place to meet with other students for group work and course discussion.

"The latest high-spec machines and games consoles are always available to work on, but it is the friendly and knowledgeable staff with an experienced background in the games industry that makes the course even more enjoyable. The course is constantly moving forward and there are always exciting new challenges and activities to become involved in.

"Some of the main highlights of the past year for me have included attending games developer meetings at various locations within Derby, as well as the Games++ conference in Leeds this May.

"Derby has an established reputation as a hotbed of development within the computer gaming sector, and having the opportunity to talk to professionals in such a relaxed atmosphere is very enjoyable and informative. I already feel like I'm part of the games industry community.

"I have already been able to strongly develop my C++ programming skills, and now have a much better insight into the history of the games industry and can more fully appreciate how the games I play are put together.

"This course has changed the way I think about games."



Scott Davies is studying Computer Games Programming at the University of Derby

Bringing games back to life

Interactive storytelling is something often frowned upon, but Chris Crawford's Storytron technology is designed to herald a new dawn


Chris Crawford

When it comes to genres that don't fit neatly within the broad embrace of the games industry, 'interactive storytelling' ranks highest. But according to **Chris Crawford**, founder of the Games Development Conference in the 1980s, maverick designer, author and interactive storytelling evangelist, this state of affairs pleases him.

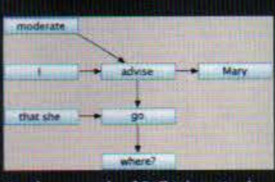
"We want as much perceived distance between our work and the games industry as we can get. If we are perceived to be part of the games industry, we're dead," says the straight-talking Crawford, who has been working on his interactive storytelling technology Storytron for the past decade.

The goal for such enthusiasts is to take the game experience to a more emotional level. Instead of manipulating objects spatially – shooting bullets, kicking balls, racing cars – interactive storytelling is all about the freedom to choose a role in an environment in which the other computer-controlled characters realistically react to what you say and the way you say it.

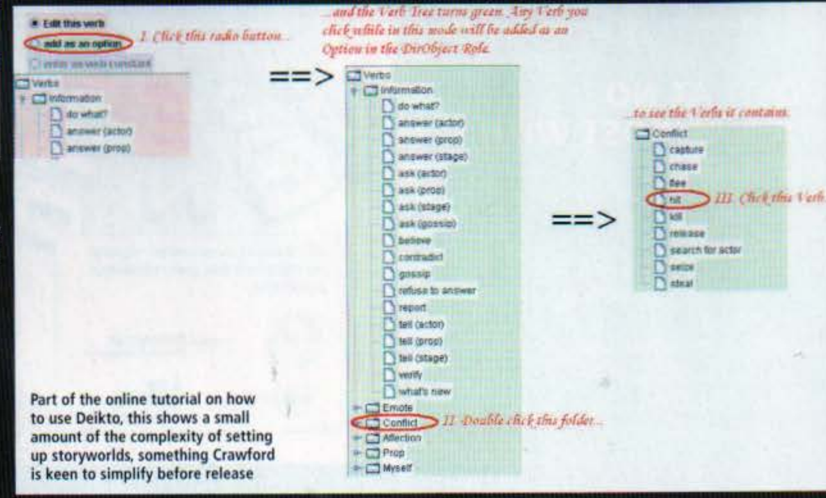
"Games are deeply wedded to spatial interaction. That's one of the reasons why games can't do storytelling," Crawford argues. "Spatial reasoning is utterly insignificant to storytelling, yet gamers' minds are so locked into spatial reasoning they don't realise that they're locked into it. Here's a design challenge for any game designer: design a game with absolutely no spatial reasoning. Only the very best game designers can design a good game without any spatial reasoning. Most can't even imagine such a game."

But interactive storytelling comes with its fair share of challenges too. Loosely defined by Crawford as 'a form of interactive entertainment in which the player plays the role of the protagonist in a dramatically rich environment', examples to date have tended to use a branching narrative structure. The problem is that without the ability for the game's supporting characters to automatically react to any situation, their response to the player's avatar has to be hardcoded. Hence the more decisions, or branching points in the game, the more development resources are required to cover every eventuality. In fact, the amount of content rises exponentially.

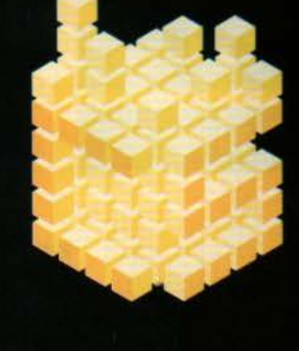
The result is that such games are potentially very expensive to make,



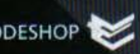
Another example of Deikto's syntax is this sentence, which in English means 'I advise Mary (with moderate urgency) that she should go…' The word 'where?' shows the sentence has not yet finished



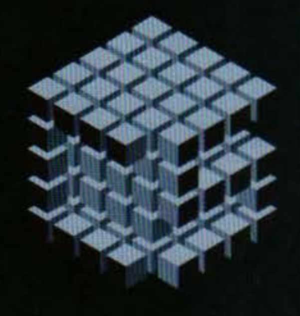
Part of the online tutorial on how to use Deikto, this shows a small amount of the complexity of setting up storyworlds, something Crawford is keen to simplify before release



www.storytron.com
www.interactivestory.net







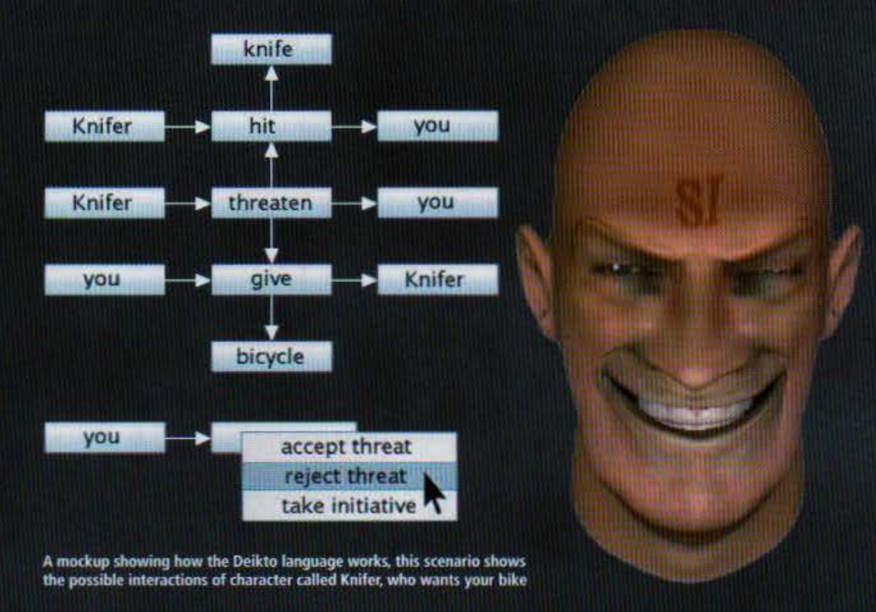
especially if you want to match the graphical polish of the standard linear-style adventure games. They're also wasteful in terms of the amount of game the player ever gets to experience, while the games themselves tend only to appeal to a small, intellectual clique. Even well resourced, mass-marketed attempts such as Sega's *Shenmue* are, at best, seen as glorious failures.

What's needed, according to Crawford, is a completely new approach. Instead of hardcoding every possible response, Storytron is a way of building storyworlds whose characters can automatically respond to a player's interactions. Underpinning this is Crawford's language for interactive storytelling, Deikto. "People have spent years trying to solve the natural language problem for computers, but you can't do it," he says. "Deikto is a toy language for a toy world."

Put more formally, it's a way of using the building blocks of human language, such as nouns, verbs and adverbs, in a structured way computers understand.

"Deikto certainly is nowhere near as expressive as real natural language, and many people fall into the trap of black-and-white thinking here: 'If it can't be as expressive as natural language, it must be useless'," Crawford says. "But the best way to measure expressive richness is to count the number of verbs. A typical game has maybe one or two dozen verbs. Natural language has many thousands. Deikto right now has 80 verbs, and we expect to quickly get that number up into the hundreds. Eventually we expect to get it up into the low thousands."

Using this verb-based foundation, Crawford and his Storytron team are building a set of tools that enable



A mockup showing how the Deikto language works, this scenario shows the possible interactions of character called Knifer, who wants your bike

people to create their own storyworlds, as they're called. These consist of two elements: dramatic components such as actors, locations and props; and dramatic principles, the way the storyworld's characters react to the available verbs.

These are created using the Storyworld Authoring Tool (SWAT), a pre-alpha version of which is currently available for download from the Storytron website. Still, as Crawford himself admits, the technology is in its very early stages, especially in terms of how easy it is to create the deep and immersive characters required to populate an enjoyable storyworld.

"There's a minimum level of complexity in storytelling, and that level is pretty high. That's the biggest problem with the technology," he says. "I'm fighting continuing battles with people who want ever-more complexity. We're elevating the violation of Keep It Simple Stupid to a capital crime."

Solving this problem will also be vital for Storytron's business model, which sees SWAT given away free and authors uploading their stories to a central library. Access to these will either be via a subscription or ad-based revenue model. Whichever is used, it will be vital that there are plenty of interactive stories available, if only to drive traffic.

Crawford reckons the company remains in good shape to meet its schedule though. "We're aiming for three playable storyworlds by June 1, 2007, and I feel pretty confident we'll reach that target."

As for the wider issue of whether he would have started out on what's become a prolonged labour of love if he'd known how hard it would be, Crawford remains as spiky as ever: "I would not have had the courage to attempt the project had I known it would be so difficult," he explains. "This says a great deal about the value of foolhardiness in creation. Only my towering egotism and monumental foolishness made this possible."



"A typical game has maybe one or two dozen verbs. Natural language has many thousands"





Dinner party drama

The most high profile example of a successful interactive story to date has been *Façade*, the one-act interactive drama created by game designer Andrew Stern and academic Michael Mateas. In it, you're invited to dinner with a couple, Grace and Trip, who are celebrating their tenth wedding anniversary. By typing in text, the player can explore their faltering relationship, with typical outcomes being that one will admit to having an affair or you being kicked out of the home for insulting behaviour. Bringing the couple together is another option, though.

But while *Façade* is similar in style to what Crawford expects people to be able to create with Storytron, technically it's something of a hybrid approach. It uses artificial intelligence to understand around 20,000 lines of dialogue, but doesn't provide the flexibility of the full natural language approach of Deikto. Clearly, it's also a one-shot experience, whereas Storytron is designed as an authoring platform for thousands of possible interactive stories.

Still, Crawford sees it as a trailblazer of just where interactive storytelling can go. "*Façade* is very important," he says. "Stern and Mateas are the Wright Brothers of interactive storytelling."

YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

BLAST FROM THE PAST

BY JEFF MINTER

Busy times at the moment – *Space Giraffe* is proceeding apace and we're putting in long days on that, with not much non-camelopardian gaming happening on weekdays save the obligatory daily *Animal Crossing* town visits and maybe a bit of *42 All-Time Classics* down the pub. I loved card games as a nipper; I had a big book of rules for hundreds of them and enjoyed learning them; the trouble was finding someone else also willing to learn the rules and actually play a game with me. There are only 18 card games in *42 ATC*, but there were a few I hadn't played, so I've spent a couple of happy evenings learning them – and these days there's no worries about finding a card partner. Not all the games in *42 ATC* are excellent, but plenty are rather good, and at 50p or so a game you can't go wrong, I reckon.

I'll usually be found in front of the 360 for at least some time at the weekend, maybe dipping into whatever's out on XBLA or spending an hour or so with bigger games I've yet to complete. Last game I bought was *Lego Star Wars II* – I'd heard good things about it and hey, who doesn't want to play through the three classic Star Wars films, even if it is as chunks of Lego. Good fun, and while it's not hugely challenging just to romp through (given you have infinite lives and can't really screw anything up), there's plenty of replay value in going back trying to 100 per cent everything, plus a fun twoplayer co-op mode, so I'm happy enough with that.

Didn't manage much gaming last weekend though, since I got involved with a spot of digital archaeology. Last time I was down at my mum's I found a bunch of really ancient cassettes with old VIC-20, Spectrum, ZX81 and 8bit Atari stuff recorded on them. Many were marked with the names of games and snippets of code that were either never released, or prototypes of things that later became better known, or things that were in no known archive and presumed lost forever. A case in point being the 8K VIC-20 version of *Headbanger's Heaven* – the (inferior) Spectrum version is common but the better VIC version seemed lost; even Mayhem on my forum, a collector who owns everything, didn't know of an extant copy of that. One of the tapes was labelled 'Headbanger 8K Vic', and that was enough to get me interested in attempting a retrieval.

I originated a thread in the forum asking the emu-heads what equipment I should go about attempting the retrieval with. I no longer owned a tape deck, and didn't know whether I should try to replicate as closely as possible the equipment of the day by buying a cheapish mono tape deck or go for a posh hi-fi and hope for better fidelity.

> It was like seeing a dinosaur brought back to life. I sat there grinning like a bastard and enjoying playing this primitive piece of frozen time

Opinions were divided, and in the end I picked up a cheapish mono player from Argos. I plugged that into the sound card, fired up Audacity and VICE, and set to. The first few attempts were a bit frustrating in that I'd get two of the game's three parts to load correctly but always fail with a load error on the third. Eventually, after a fair amount of playing with levels and tweaking of the recording in Audacity, I convinced VICE to load a working copy.

The machine state was saved for archive, and it was really satisfying to finally have this old game restored and working again. But there was one tape I'd found that I almost didn't dare touch. It was the only surviving tape from my sixth form college days, when I'd started learning to code on the Commodore PET.

I didn't dare believe there'd be anything retrievable from that. However when I did sample it there was what looked like a fairly robust PET program recording on it. My first attempt at loading it told me that it was *Star Fire* – my all-machine-code magnum opus from those times, something I truly thought would never be seen again – but it failed to load. No amount of twiddling and tweaking could persuade the thing to come in. I was set to give up, hugely disappointed to be so close and yet so far from retrieving such an artefact from deep prehistory.

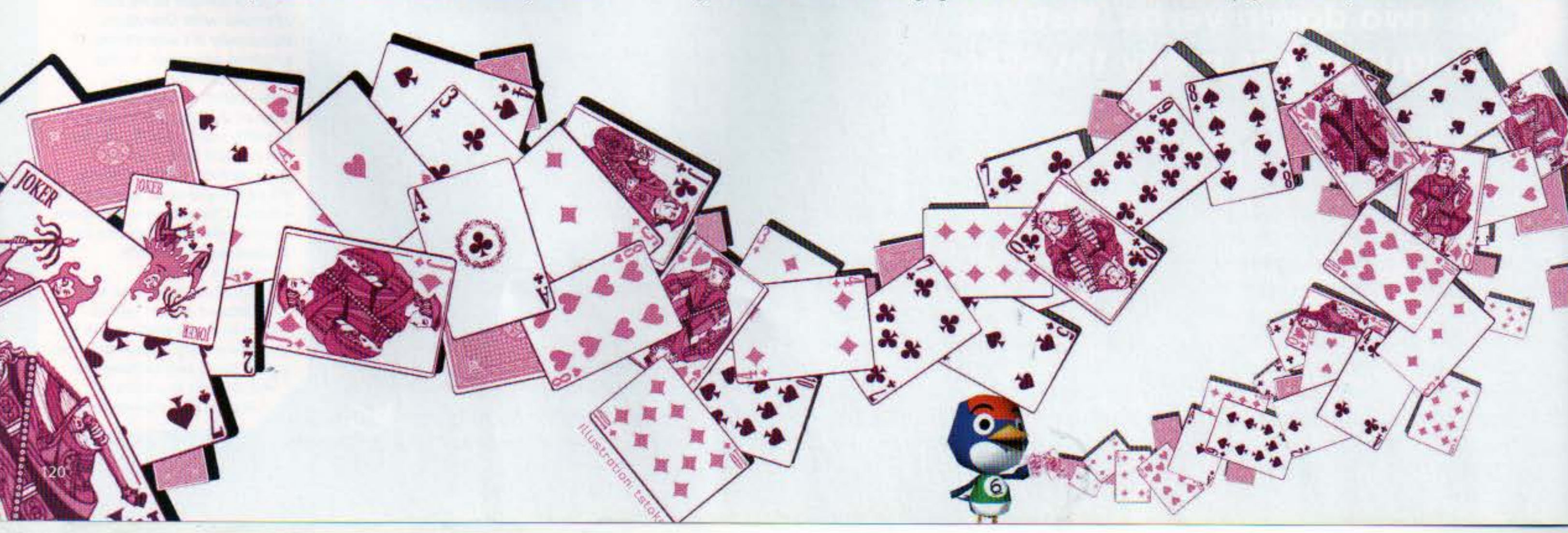
Then something in my water told me to have one last go, using a second image I'd retrieved from side two. I'd tried this before with all kinds of emu fiddles and waveform tweaks and nothing had worked. But something made me want to have one last try; turn off all the tweaks, and just feed in the raw image and see what happened.

It loaded without an error message. This had occasionally happened before but attempting a run still yielded a crash, making me believe that the side two image was in fact incomplete – but on this last try, bugger me if it didn't work.

I found myself playing a game that I'd last played sitting in the dingy computer hut at sixth form in 1979. It was like seeing a dinosaur brought to life, a direct connection to my very origins as a coder, and I sat there grinning like a bastard and enjoying playing this primitive, ugly piece of frozen time far more than I've enjoyed playing anything for ages.

At least this weekend my Achievements were actual little bits of history preserved and restored, rather than just numbers added to my Gamerscore. I'm happy with that.

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser



APOCALYPSE

BY TIM GUEST

The novelist William Styron, author of Darkness Visible – a memoir of his severe depression – was regularly approached by members of the public who said the book had stopped them, too, committing suicide. In his later years, police departments would call Styron up to ask if he would help talk a potential suicide down. He was usually successful. Life is short, art is long; in some cases, art helps make life longer. If games are art, or worthy of study – or whatever our current argument is to defend the way we kill time – why then do we never hear these kinds of redemptive stories about videogames? Is it because, in our simulated worlds, there's nothing at stake? Because, through the TV screen, we find experience but no risk?

In my spare time, while writing, I used to play a computer version of Risk. There's very little physical risk in the life of a writer (we risk our souls every day though, not to mention our muscle tone). On a typical time-wasting afternoon, I would have Ariel Sharon on my back in north Africa, Slobodan Milosevic pinned down in Australasia. Vaclav Havel would take out Sharon (that was a culture clash) and I would waltz over Havel in turn; it would come down to me vs Milosevic, with me controlling six continents and him holed up in Australia. Often, though, I couldn't bring myself to kill him. I was enjoying world domination too much (also, victory meant work). So I'd let him build up his armies for a while, then knock him down, then build him up. In the end I would let him escape, and play 'chase the dictator' through Asia, across Europe, via Iceland and into Canada where, I guess, they stopped making art films long enough to offer him asylum. I grew bored and pulled the plug.

But, boy, did it let me know how Bush is feeling right now. He's got 55 divisions in Arabia, armies all over Europe and a few in Asia; there's no one else on the board (a small stockpile in Russia; China's been stacking pieces for a while but never seems to invade). Since he cheated and stole most of North America (he can't believe no one noticed!) it's been sixes all the way. And what's the point of having so many pieces if you can't play?

Boardgames weren't invented to tell stories, but they involve us in them nonetheless. (We'll have to discuss this quietly, in brackets, in case we wake up the narratologists and the ludologists, who'll come baying for grants – but, of course, all our play tells stories, and all our stories help us conquer pain. Cindy Dell Clark, professor of human development and family studies at Penn State, has written about the ways children with chronic illnesses use what she calls 'imaginal coping' – narrative games that weave their pain into play. One asthmatic boy pretended his breathing machine was a toy plane; another diabetic child re-imagined his needle as a zebra, giving him a kiss.)

> "I've taken to putting DefCon on automatic, turning out the lights, and watching as the world ends"

Lately, I've replaced Risk with *DefCon* – clearly based on Risk, but far more involving. In *DefCon*, subtitled 'Everybody Dies', three or four global powers crawl toward a nuclear exchange: ICBMs and stealth bombers arc across the sky; with each hit, the number of millions killed flashes up in cold white type.

It's an alternate future, the cold war that could have been – as much an exploration of what might have happened as Philip K Dick's The Man In The High Castle was of the Japanese and Germans winning WWII. In the case of *DefCon* the story is short – everybody dies – but it's a story nonetheless. I've taken to putting it on automatic, turning out the lights, and watching as the world ends.

Pain drives us to narrate, Freud wrote. Stories are how we navigate terrain, both real and psychological – and there's no reason to navigate elsewhere unless you're unhappy here. The two times gaming has really, deeply moved me, the games have expressed a real, human wound. In Adam Cadre's *Photopia*, the player inhabits different shoes: the drunk driver who causes an accident; a child being told a story by her babysitter; a Martian inside the story. Only in its final moments, after seeing the babysitter through the eyes of everyone she loves, do we realise she died in the crash, the one we caused.

Cadre's own sister died suddenly, and the power of the game to move us resonates clearly with his own loss. In *DefCon* we nearly killed ourselves, but we didn't; except, as Styron related, the danger never leaves. Now, as the old global precautions held in place by the Geneva Conventions are being trampled by the new US doctrine of pre-emptive war, we might still take our own lives. Former US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara believes mankind's greatest overlooked danger is what he calls 'apocalypse soon': a local nuclear exchange mushrooming into a wider nuclear conflict. He tells this story wherever people listen, in the hope of creating a better alternate future, an 'apocalypse never'. In the meantime, we can play *DefCon*, and live inside that story of loss. We can remind ourselves how everything is at risk. Hope that we, too, can be talked down from the ledge.

Tim Guest is working on a book about virtual worlds. Contact him if you have a virtual tale to tell via tim@timguest.net



Illustration: tstokes

BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

NO HARM, NO FOUL

BY MR BIFFO

Mainstream popular culture has always had a somewhat rubbish relationship with videogames. Working in TV, it's always a risk putting anything to do with games into a script, because nine times out of ten it comes out looking a bit 'Disco Vicar'.

I recently wrote a scene featuring videogames into a show I was working on. It was a fairly throwaway little moment; a father and son sitting in front of a TV, playing a game.

I originally had a line in there about cheating with 'infinite health', and got asked to change it to 'infinite lives'. I tried to explain that these days health is a lot more common in games than infinite lives, and they should be glad I hadn't referred to Hot Coffee. I lost the debate.

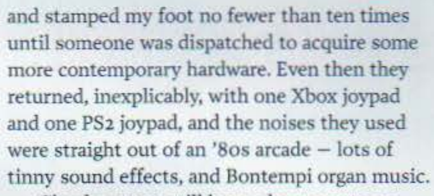
Worse than this, on the night it came to be filmed, the actors were sitting there holding massive, flight simulator-style joysticks. Upon seeing them, I immediately shrieked in horror, and stamped my foot no fewer than ten times until someone was dispatched to acquire some more contemporary hardware. Even then they returned, inexplicably, with one Xbox joypad and one PS2 joypad, and the noises they used were straight out of an '80s arcade – lots of tinny sound effects, and Bontempi organ music.

Clearly, games still have a long way to go before they can escape the stereotype that got hardwired into the public consciousness in about 1992. It's like when you see a fake rock band in a children's TV show – they always look like Mötley Crüe, despite the fact no rock band (including Mötley Crüe, probably) has looked like Mötley Crüe since 1985; all day-glo poodle wigs and Billy Idol sneers.

Similarly, the stereotype still persists that videogames will rot your brain; that they're all violent, and will stunt the development of your child. I know people who wouldn't dream of having a PS2 in their house in case it tried to possess their offspring, or turned them into Charles Manson.

My other half and I try to limit the amount of games our kids play, but I'm no longer convinced that games are as harmful as I once thought they were (or had the potential to be, anyway). We used to worry about the amount of time our kids spent playing games, and feared that it would stunt their social skills.

Certainly, I'm a loose supporter of the argument that violent videogames could well desensitise you to violence. I mean, if all you do with your life is play violent games where you get to burn out people's eyes and grind faces with industrial tools, of course it's going to have an effect. Albeit only in the same way that you'll start dreaming about biscuits if all you ever do is eat biscuits, and play with biscuits, and live in a house made out of biscuits, and all your friends are imaginary biscuit people.



> "If you're the sort of person who's likely to go on a violent rampage, you're as likely to be inspired by a sack of biscuits as a videogame"

At the same time, I fully appreciate the argument that if you're the sort of person who is likely to go on a violent rampage, you're as likely to be inspired by a sack of biscuits as you are a violent videogame.

Certainly, I think back to how much I played games as a kid – before the tabloids started banging their drum about how they'll rot your soul – and it took up a hefty proportion of my teenage life. Oh, I also used to like drawing, and riding my bike, and throwing rocks at pensioners. And I used to go and see friends (usually to play games). But there's no doubt that I loved games, and I played them a lot, and I don't think it's done me a great deal of harm. Quite the opposite: I think games fuelled my imagination.

Therefore, I'm not convinced games have harmed my kids. They play games with their friends – *Mario Party*, and *Lego Star Wars*, and *Wario Ware* – and they're far from sitting there playing them in silence. And they tend not to play shoot 'em ups, favouring the likes of *Zoo Tycoon*, or *The Sims*, or *Harvest Moon* – all of which are far from harmful. In fact, I'd argue that they're borderline proper educational, and are equipping them with skills that could come in useful in their adult life.

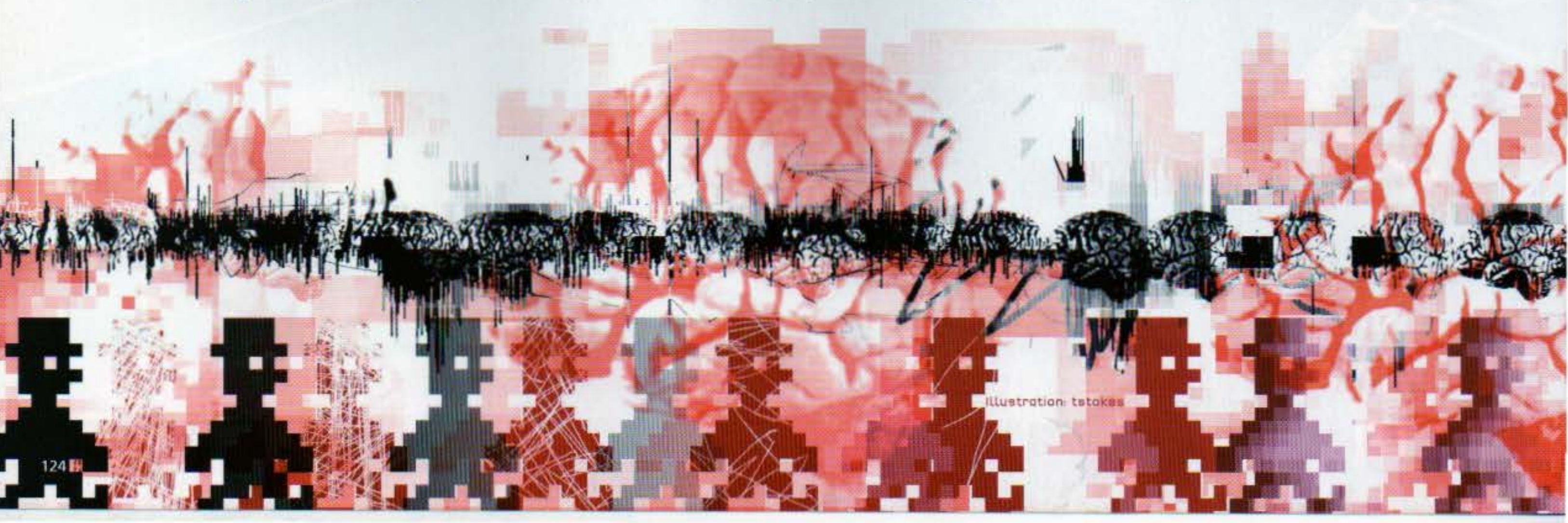
I'd much rather my kids sat down and played on *Rollercoaster Tycoon* for 90 minutes, or designed graphics in *Animal Crossing*, than watched the vacuous tripe that is The Cheetah Girls movie. Or three episodes of The Suite Life with Zack and Cody. Or hours spent chatting to paedophiles on MSN. Crikey, even *Call Of Duty 2* contains an infinite amount more intellectual stimulus than the average episode of Naruto.

What doesn't help is that the really big-name games – the ones that grab the shock headlines – are of the big tits/big guns/school bully variety.

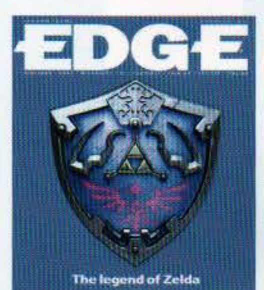
Isn't it about time that the industry united in trying to change perceptions of games? We need a concerted PR campaign to promote the more positive aspects of gaming, and once and for all dispel the media's warped perception of what games are, and what they can be.

If for no other reason than to convince Mrs Biffo that staying up until 4am playing *Company Of Heroes* isn't an utter waste of my life. Or maybe I'll just give her a good punching.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television


Illustration: tstokes

inbox



Issue 169

ONLINE OFFLINE
Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: If AI advances, what will it think of human gamers?
If the AI in games and in general advances from its current sideshow existence, what will it think of gamers and humans? Not only would an artificial intelligence be a faster and more strategic player, but it might also think humans are a lesser beings than pure binary intelligences. And it's already happening! This Japanese food robot identifies human reporters as bacon! We are just meat and sausages to them! http://tinyurl.com/z5pjc This is a shocking view that I have never even thought about before – that the AIs we are creating might not see us as gods at all.
sucraloser

I already consider you a lesser being. So does my toaster.
darthjim

So what do we taste like? I hope it is bacon. Mmmmmmm.
subatai

I was unfortunate to have seen E4's coverage of the BAFTA Video Games Awards on October 17. This was supposed to be a celebration of gaming, but instead I saw an embarrassing spectacle presented by people who appeared to know very little about games, and didn't make any effort to cover up their indifference. I don't know whether this was down to BAFTA or E4, but if it was the former then they should be ashamed.

The jokes raised barely a ripple of laughter, and much effort was spent trying to decide whether it was necessary to be a geek to be a gamer. All the time, effort and money spent producing the games was belittled by people who don't appreciate the creativity and dedication involved. The film awards celebrate the films as well as all the creative and technical people who made them possible, but you wouldn't have known who the recipients of the games awards were.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the indifference of the presenters – many gave out awards admitting they don't normally play games – is that they simply didn't know who they were presenting awards to. Only people who play games regularly will be aware of names like Molyneux and Miyamoto, so it would have been more fitting for the awards to have been presented by those who work closely with games – well-known games players from the media and journalism, and other games professionals.

I applaud BAFTA for trying to raise the profile and professionalism of the games industry, but I feel they totally misjudged the audience. Hopefully they can learn from this year's mistakes.
J Tweedy

"All the time, effort and money spent producing the games was belittled by people who don't appreciate the creativity and dedication involved"

Acknowledgement is fantastic in any form. To think someone has noticed your efforts or achievements provides a boost to anyone and usually makes you work harder to be even better, so I must write about the toe-curling embarrassment I felt as I watched the recent British Academy Video Games Awards.

Don't misunderstand me, I think the fact that the British Academy have recognised making games as a legitimate artform to be considered alongside film and television is a wonderful thing for everyone and it's perhaps a little overdue. However, the execution of such a breakthrough event left an awful lot to be desired. Stewarded from the top by Vernon Kay and Dave Berry, I'm sure everyone watching found themselves fearing the worst. A comic dream team second only to the Chuckle Brothers was only ever going to hinder the event, but as Vernon writhed in the pain of his comedic death on stage, it struck me just how unhelpful to the industry as a whole a televised roasting like this was.

C-list celebrities gathered like vultures, queuing up apparently to do nothing more than laugh not just at gaming but at the people who play games, this coming shortly before the inevitable truth that few of the people involved on the night had so much as lifted a control pad in their lives.



Win a DS Lite for the best letter

It was tantamount to gathering a bunch of exposure-hungry also-ran celebrities who've never seen a movie to present BAFTAs. I'm not suggesting that the BAVGAs should ever have been given the same ceremony and stoic seriousness of the BAFTAs, I just feel that the cruel mocking of the industry the event seemed to amount to was somewhat less than the artform deserved, particularly given the current profitability and growth of gaming.

Anyone watching the event who doesn't play games or who isn't involved in the industry would have come away thinking that the good old stereotype of the geek in his bedroom with no friends is the only person who plays these sad little games. I think it's a real shame when the event could have been such a celebration of the genuinely talented designers, programmers and developers out there making outstanding pieces of interactive entertainment for everyone.

The academy probably intended a respectful nod to the industry, but in my opinion it was a pitying pat on the head. An acknowledgement like that doesn't feel quite as good.
Jonathan Mack

The televising of the BAVGAs produced a bumper post-bag this month, and



hopefully the producers of the event and the broadcast will take note of the strength of opinion, which was universally insulted by the dismissive comments of some presenters.

Interesting to read in E169 the reader's comments on the Trevor McDonald show about games, because it was the same day that I read in the October 30 issue of the New Statesman an article called 'Learn to be a bully'.

In this article the author paints a vivid picture, asking the reader to 'imagine your child at school. His classmates are terrifying other kids with baseball bats. Then they turn on the teachers... it could be happening right now, thanks to the release of the videogame *Bully*.' The article continues in the same tone, finding it 'unsurprising' that the game has caused controversy in the wake of the Amish school massacre, noting lawyer Jack Thompson's attempts to have it banned and taking at face-value his description of the game is a "Columbine simulator".

What frustrates me about this short article is that I have always taken the New Statesman to be a magazine that, even if it doesn't necessarily contain intelligent writing, at least contains articles written to a higher standard than I would find in The News Of The World; this is apparently not the case. Certainly I wouldn't expect to find it publishing an article condemning a 15-rated film because children might see it.

How many more times do we have to go through this cycle of moral panic? It seems that, no matter how mainstream games become, the release of a title with controversial subject matter is always greeted with hand-wringing articles asking us to, please, think of the children.

Increasingly these days I find that I don't care if videogames are art. I don't care how the public at large perceive gamers. I just want to get to a point where people acknowledge that games aimed at adults have a right to exist.

Chris Arnsby



John Archer rightly notes that too high a proportion of games are violent, Epic's *Gears Of War* being a particularly vivid case in point



Chris Arnsby despairs of the press response to *Bully*. But even though it was negative, did Rockstar despair of the quantity of coverage?

Bully has, rather inevitably, brought out the worst in many publications, but it is true to say that the New Statesman – a sponsor of the recent GameCity event in Nottingham (see p18), is usually more enlightened than most.

"An encyclopaedic knowledge of videogames will more often get you a funny look than a place in the black chair of Mastermind"

I don't think I can be alone in my bewilderment at Mr Biffo's column in E169.

I agree that we need to stop pigeon-holing ourselves in order for the outside perception of our chosen pass-time to improve. Bookworms, art lovers, film buffs, poetry lovers, wine aficionados, all garner some sort of respect from the rest of society, but an encyclopaedic knowledge of videogames will more often get you a funny look than a place in the black chair of Mastermind. There is an argument that we only have ourselves to blame, as our hobby seems to attract some of the most inclusively narrow-minded members-only behaviour you are likely to witness.

And yet, Mr Biffo managed to fall into this very trap with a rant I could only associate with the most brainwashed fanboys. It's Mr Biffo's my-favourite-console-is-better-than-your-favourite-console attitude that keeps the public perspective of gaming in the playground, the domain of little boys who refuse to grow up.

I for one am in a curious position, akin to Mr Biffo's nephew. At 27, I have found myself increasingly attracted to Nintendo's hardware ever since it launched the GBA. I used to consider Nintendo's products to be designed with children more in mind, yet as my opinions of gaming mature I find myself deliciously drawn to the maniacally-monikered Wii. There's something about it that screams 'play with me NOW' while retaining that crisp design we have come to expect of our gadgets since the iPod first showed its pretty little face.

I will be the first to admit that the PS3 is nowhere near as innovative as Wii. The tilt control sounds like an afterthought, the lack of vibration a disappointment, the price point is absolutely terrifying. And yet, and yet... I haven't felt this type of yearning and excitement about anything in gaming since the first real screenshots and footage of the PS2. Before that, I hadn't experienced it since getting my hands on a PlayStation pad In a demonstration booth.

I learned something new about the public perception of consoles on my lunch break at work the other day. I heard two of my colleagues, both fathers, discussing their children's Christmas presents. One was buying his a DS Lite, the other a PSP. They discussed the differences in vague terms, before finishing with the agreement that 'these things are all the same anyway'. I bit my tongue.

The fact of the matter is that we all love our own experiences of videogames for our own personal reasons, and we should embrace that. I don't care if you only every play this year's football title, along with this month's WWII FPS. I don't care if you only play *WOW* on your maxed-out PC. I don't care if your passion is obscure Japanese dating games on your imported PS2. I don't care if you want to play with your third Station, if

Continued



Topic: Consistently brilliant videogame items

My first vote goes to zombies. Whatever form they appear in, they are consistently brilliant, from *Resident Evil*, to *Dead Rising*, to *Oblivion*, to *House Of The Dead*, to *Urban Dead*, to generic *FPS X*.
JoJoeyJoJo

Crates. They usually have good stuff in them, are great for kicking and shooting and are also pretty useful for hiding behind.
bombfrog

The Spas Shotgun. Always the best option for tight corridors.
ScotsWahey

Bleedin' great swords. And lightsabers. Even when the Star Wars games are cack (frequently), unleashing 'glowing rod of doom' death on all and sundry is an unfailingly liberating experience. "Whhuuuuuuuum" *crackle* "Whhuuuuuuuum" Brilliant.
darthjim

Hookshot-alikes. Such a simple but effective and fun way of altering how a player can interact with their environment.
Pause

Smart bombs.
tigersound

Roast chicken health power-ups.
Gas

Mushrooms and money in all its forms.
Foxy

Chainsaws! chug chug chug... BRZZZZZzzzzZZZZZt!
LesterUnlimited

Shops/merchants. I can't think of a single game where selling your virtual shite for virtual money wasnt fun, likewise for buying new stuff.
bantha_fodder

Claws.
yxnomei

Springboards that make your character jump to knee-cripplingly high heights.
Gremill

Ninjas. Shit's gotta have *ninjas* for top marks.
kabbes

you're experiencing 360 shades of fun, or just want to Wii yourself. All I care about is that we're playing, and we're enjoying ourselves. If we can communicate to people the enjoyment we get from playing, rather than winding ourselves up at how other choose to enjoy themselves, then maybe tomorrow we'll all be having a bit more fun.

Andrew Merson

It's the hallmark of a good columnist to create debate, and the hallmark of the videogame world to see things in black and white (with occasional blooms of red mist). The hallmark of a good letter, however, is that it wins a DS Lite.

Having read Toby Marshall's letter (**E**168) I have to agree with much of what he says about videogame violence. I have been gaming since I first hit rubber keys on a Spectrum, and still love it. But has it truly moved on from Donkey Kong smacking barrels off a jumping plumber's head?

I think as gamers we fail to notice certain aspects of our interest until non-gamers point them out, one being the level of violence in games. I think the industry fails to think outside the box and believes only 'hunter killer' games will work. I also think that there is a certain amount of conditioning going on: you don't think twice about what the games represent, you just notice that Rikimaru looked cool as he ran that guard through.

Yes, the press blow it way out of proportion, despite Nintendo being on the verge of a 'hug 'em up.' There are great non-violent games available, but not enough. I wish they were, so my wife would be happy watching me game or even joining in. Yes, she's a girl and didn't play cowboys and Indians or have a ray gun as a child. But she does have a valid case when pointing out that most games have too much killing.

So now I face restrictions when scanning the shelves of next-gen games: *Gears Of War*, *Halo 3*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Heavenly Sword*, *Metal Gear*, Mario (well he does jump on heads) are all out of favour. So I guess I'll just wave my Wii around.

It's a big world out there beyond the X button being shoot. If I loved killing so much I'd plug my pad into the evening news and pretend it was a cutscene. There has to be more variety, to stop the press getting the wrong end of the stick and to let my wife play more. But mainly to go beyond what has been done and to be truly creative.

John Archer



Topic: Radio Five – Live
They are at Game On and are discussing the cultural effects of videogames during the next half-hour or so. I believe you can listen to it over the internet as well as your wireless. I have learned that the Nintendo Wii has a 'movable' control system. "What is a computer game made of?" is among the classic questions being asked.
j66

What was the answer? Plastic?
OTOKO

Blood, sweat and tears, apparently. He quickly added explosions and guns to that though. Must be why they seal the boxes in plastic wrap. Ba-dum etc.
j66

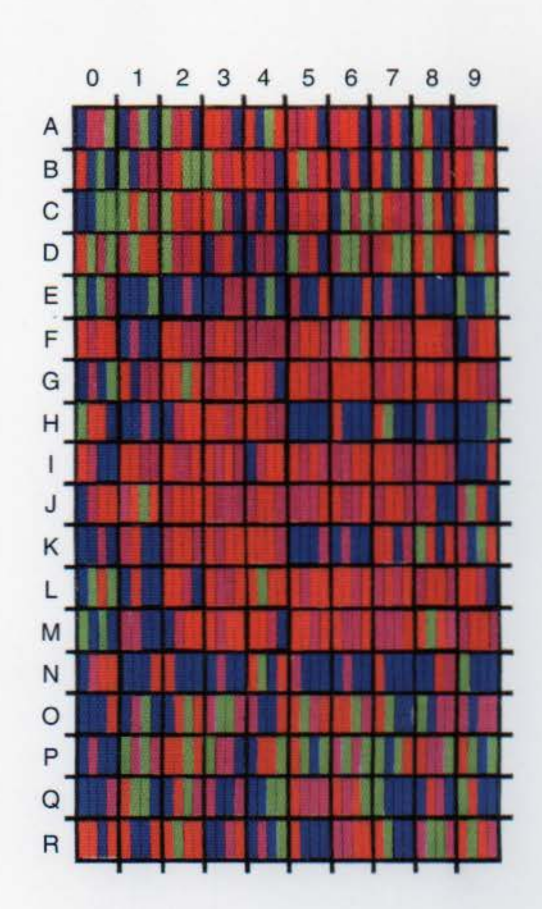
Nah, they're made of rainbows. Just hold the disc up to the light... See...
eje

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